

A critical review of mainstream Christianity's stance on euthanasia

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Abstract

This article aims to present an alternative anthropo-theological reading that makes it possible to assign new meanings to euthanasia in relation to eternal life and to question elements employed within Christianity. The religious field has put forward arguments both in favor of and against euthanasia; in fact, it is hegemonic Christianity—where the alignment of different Christian institutions around certain issues can be identified—that has generated a discourse against it, creating the idea that this is the only legitimate way to approach the topic. Drawing on a methodology related to the hermeneutics of suspicion and a social bioethical perspective, this article develops a critique of the discourses and narratives that Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism, has articulated against euthanasia and its regulation.

Keywords: Euthanasia. Right to die. Theology. Religion. Christianity. Death.

Resumo

Revisão crítica do cristianismo hegemônico sobre a eutanásia

Este texto tem como objetivo apresentar uma leitura antropo-teológica alternativa que permita ressignificar a eutanásia em relação à vida eterna e que questione elementos utilizados no cristianismo. O campo religioso tem oferecido argumentos a favor e contra a eutanásia; de fato, é no cristianismo hegemônico que diferentes instituições cristãs convergem em torno de certas temáticas que têm produzido um discurso contrário ao que estas defendem, criando a ideia de que essa é a única forma legítima de se aproximar do tema. Este artigo, a partir de uma metodologia vinculada à hermenêutica da suspeita e a uma perspectiva de bioética social, desenvolve uma crítica aos discursos e às narrativas que o cristianismo, particularmente o catolicismo romano, tem articulado contra a eutanásia e a sua regulamentação.

Palavras-chave: Eutanásia. Direito a morrer. Teologia. Religião. Cristianismo. Morte.

Resumen

Revisión crítica del cristianismo hegemónico acerca de la eutanasia

Este texto tiene como objetivo presentar una lectura antropoteológica alternativa que permita resignificar la eutanasia con la vida eterna y que cuestione elementos empleados en el cristianismo. El campo religioso ha dado argumentos a favor y en contra de la eutanasia; de hecho, es el cristianismo hegemónico, en que se reconoce la alineación de diferentes instituciones cristianas sobre ciertas temáticas, el que ha generado un discurso en contra, creando la idea de que es la única forma de aproximarse a este tema. Este artículo, a partir de una metodología relacionada con la hermenéutica de la sospecha y una perspectiva bioética social, desarrolla una crítica a los discursos y narrativas que el cristianismo, particularmente el catolicismo romano, ha articulado en contra de la eutanasia y de su regulación.

Palabras clave: Eutanasia. Derecho a morir. Teología. Religión. Cristianismo. Muerte.

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*Human beings live together,
but each person dies alone
and death is the ultimate loneliness¹
for as long as we exist,
death is not present,
and when death is present,
we no longer exist²*

Reflecting on death ultimately means reflecting on life, on the kind of life one lives, and on the kind of life one aspires to. In this sense, understanding death as part of life entails an awareness of personal wishes and autonomy. Although classical bioethics has advocated for this principle³, it should go further by considering cultural factors that shape and constrain autonomy.

Among these factors, religion plays a decisive role, not only because of its doctrinal influence, but also because it shapes public perceptions of the body, suffering, obedience, and death. And since reflection on death is always external to oneself, our understanding of it comes from others, as Vidal states: *certainly of death is a "knowledge," but never an "experience"*⁴. Meanwhile, euthanasia and assisted suicide are two ethical practices strongly rejected by sectors that demonize human agency when it conflicts with their dogmatic beliefs, through which they uphold an alleged divine will based on certain sacred texts.

In light of this, this study develops three points to identify hegemonic Christianity as a cultural artifact that employs narratives of concealment and therefore needs to be exposed⁵, as these narratives have been established based on readings of biblical texts and documents that have shaped a culture opposed to autonomy, expressed mainly from recurring themes that are not always questioned.

This argument is justified by the history of our continent, which is why our diverse Latin American societies should not be understood without considering Christianity as one of the factors that have shaped the culture. Even in societies considered secular, it could be argued that the postulates of different forms of Christianity have been secularized to such an extent that they have been transposed into broader cultural norms, manifesting themselves in the rejection of any circumstance that implies departing from their worldview and understanding of the human being, and consequently of life and also of death. This,

in turn, implies recognizing the existence of a Christian coloniality.

This coloniality began with the arrival of the first missionaries, who not only provided subjects for the Spanish and Portuguese crowns, but also forged, Bible in hand, an absolutist stance based on the idea of an all-seeing God. The colonial experience was once again confronted in political contexts in which Christian institutions joined forces against women's rights to have abortions, same-sex marriage, and comprehensive sex education.

The argument used by minors to justify their actions is merely an adult-centered excuse that views people as always requiring guardianship, a situation that, as will be seen, also extends to other people, who, in these terms, would be infantilized. This is challenged by a critique grounded in social bioethics⁶ and a hermeneutics of suspicion⁷, which highlights institutional positions based on control and surveillance as strategies/technologies that sustain their practices. Therefore, Christian doctrine on euthanasia and the narratives associated with it will be examined to discuss a theological view on eternal life and dying with dignity.

Christian doctrine on euthanasia

Christianity does not exist in the singular; there are a number of denominations that have conquered space with different interpretations of what they consider true and necessary in their religious doctrine. In this sense, I use the term "hegemonic Christianity" to designate a group of institutions that concentrate their efforts on opposing rights won by marginalized social groups⁸. Specifically, addressing Christian doctrine on euthanasia requires considering two elements: the first is associated with a series of biblical texts that would reinforce this position, and the second concerns official positions of one of the most important Christian denominations, Roman Catholicism.

The Bible as an artifact used against euthanasia

This discussion does not aim to provide a detailed exegesis of biblical passages presented here,

but rather to show how certain uses of these passages function as cultural arguments against autonomy and bioethical deliberation about the end of life. The Judeo-Christian narrative has used the Bible as an instrument to ensure its credibility. Resorting to this text as an authority has been a recurring practice throughout the history of Christianity; only men were allowed to read, proclaim, and study it. Critical studies proposed by women in their diversity have brought a richness that goes beyond the masculinizing limits of official structures, enabling alternative hermeneutical scenarios for understanding and questioning institutional control and surveillance, both in the processes of its writing and throughout the hermeneutical process.

Regarding euthanasia, one of the biblical passages that has been widely used is the so-called *Sixth Commandment*, "Thou shalt not kill"⁹. The biblical interpretation of this issue, for example, in the account of Abel's death at the hands of Cain¹⁰, draws on the question of justice or the value of blood as a principle of life¹¹, leading some denominations to avoid even blood transfusions or organ donation. In all of this, it is possible to observe a literal reading of the Bible that has resulted in an understanding of life and death without any nuance, except when a particular interpretation is convenient.

In this sense, there is a "Christian" struggle against abortion and euthanasia, supposedly based on a biblical precept, while other narratives in which death is justified are overlooked in their analysis. For example, in II Samuel 1:2-10, an Amalekite tells David that he killed Saul at the king's own request when he was wounded and had no chance of surviving. This distinction is relevant: the passage does not allow us to simply state that the Amalekite actually killed Saul, since I Samuel 31:3-5 presents another account of the king's death and attributes the outcome to Saul's suicide after his armor-bearer refused to kill him¹². Therefore, the passage cannot be directly equated with contemporary euthanasia, although it shows that Scripture does not address death according to a single, simple, or abstract logic, but rather by means of situated accounts, distinct narrative voices, and internal tensions that make any simplistic biblical appeal to the absolute value of life insufficient.

In Judges 19:22-29, it is also possible to observe a scene of extreme violence against a woman's body, first subjected to collective sexual assault and then transformed, through her dismemberment and the sending of her remains to the tribes, into a political symbol for biblical Israel¹³. This is not the case of euthanasia; however, the account shows that the Bible contains narratives in which life, the body, and death are treated through violent, symbolic, and communal registers. Thus, this passage prevents a simplistic reading of the slogan "life is sacred," not because it legitimizes a contemporary decision regarding the end of life, but because it reveals the internal complexity of a Scripture in which bodies may become inscribed in power struggles, pedagogies of horror, and collective mechanisms of mobilization.

Leviticus 20:10-16 also presents death as a sanction within a normative framework of holiness, purity, and community membership¹⁴. The reference does not seek to transpose this legal framework to the present or use it as an argument for contemporary bioethical deliberation, but rather to demonstrate that certain Christian uses of Scripture select some texts to defend an absolute sanctity of life while leaving aside other passages in which death is prescribed by normative frameworks within the same textual tradition, without hermeneutical consequence. The problem, therefore, is not that Leviticus can resolve a modern debate on euthanasia, but rather that it prevents a simplistic, homogeneous, and historically decontextualized biblical appeal regarding life, as if the canon did not contain tensions, normative mediations, and diverse ethical registers.

A critical interpretation of these texts would lead to thinking beyond repeated slogans, especially when they are used to prevent situated bioethical deliberation on autonomy and suffering at the end of life. Based on these and other passages, life would be conditioned by specific circumstances that are overlooked in religious narratives. These examples allow a person, including someone of faith, to question any divine will present in the biblical passages, as well as the way the Bible itself has been used to justify death according to the convenience of its alleged official interpreters.

These biblical passages cannot be directly equated with any notion of euthanasia, but they demonstrate limitations of the religious argument regarding life, since there are situations within Scripture itself, considered sacred by the Judeo-Christian world, that qualify certain circumstances—here, in favor of the law and of war—yet the world of believers does not necessarily seek an interpretation that favors freedom of conscience. This position is also challenged using the following passage:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder; and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell¹⁵.

This passage would have served to support a more radical perspective on death. However, none of these biblical interpretations is based on care. There is no other passage that alludes to the act of euthanasia itself.

Another way of preventing even consideration of euthanasia is the concept of divinity adopted by Judeo-Christianity. Feminist criticism questions whether the established divine image is related to an idea of ownership that, based on monotheism, became sexist¹⁶. One of the texts that makes it possible to identify this attitude can be found in Exodus 20:4:

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me¹⁷.

These biblical texts also attribute the following to this divinity:

*See now
that I myself am he!
There is no god besides me.
I put to death and I bring to life,
I have wounded and I will heal,
and no one can deliver out of my hand¹⁸.*

And:

The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up¹⁹.

Both texts, which are also used against euthanasia, are often cited without considering their context. The first is part of a nationalist song that seeks to affirm the Israelite deity in contrast to practices associated with other neighboring nations and their practices²⁰, which may have involved human sacrifices for religious reasons, rather than making the categorical and timeless statement that neoconservative groups seek to uphold. The second text is part of a song, and not a legislative text²¹. Like the previous passage, its hermeneutical horizon must therefore be considered, including Hannah's infertility and her belief that the deity in whom she believes can grant life. Neither of these passages is related to euthanasia. There is no text that directly and justifiably asserts a position against it.

Following this same line of argument, I cannot fail to mention that hegemonic Christianity overlooks what has been recognized as the golden rule of Christianity:

Jesus replied: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments²².

The Christian *ethos* present in this passage is not based on absolute dominion over life or death, but on an enduring bond that approaches another person's life based on one's understanding of the divine. This explains why it becomes necessary to question the conception of the divine upheld by these groups, which is why listening to other theological perspectives becomes increasingly important. For now, I can only say that questioning these biblical texts reveals a decontextualized reading of the passages that benefits the institution. Were these the same texts not read when Abya Yala was massacred? Or when the Inquisition persecuted and burned heretics? Far from being a teacher of humanity, as John XXIII once stated, the Church, or more precisely, certain churches, have acted against concrete ways in which life seeks to manifest itself.

Roman Catholic documents

Roman Catholicism is the most widespread Christian denomination and has the largest number of followers worldwide, accounting for approximately one-third of the nearly 2.4 billion people who identify as Christians globally^{23,24}. Based on the documents mentioned here, this church's position on euthanasia will be presented, which has led other churches to adopt similar positions on the issue. Its relevance to this article lies not only in its doctrinal nature, but also in its ability to influence public perceptions, legislative debates, and family or clinical decisions regarding the end of life.

Iura et bona (1980)

The main point of this document is that it would not be possible to oppose a "man's" life without opposing his understanding of God's love. The argumentative framework proposed by the "value of human life," which introduces the document, is challenged by a footnote stating: *The issues of the death penalty and war are completely left aside, as they would require specific considerations unrelated to the subject of this Declaration*²⁵.

The document insists on defining the concept of "euthanasia," considered it a *violation of divine law and an offense against human dignity, a crime against life, and an attack against humanity*²⁵. To this end, it develops, as a theoretical tool, the distinction between proportionate and disproportionate measures, in order to establish that only measures used by Catholicism in its analysis would be valid.

Evangelium vitae (1995)

John Paul II, a pontiff known for his conservative stance, states in his encyclical letter *Evangelium vitae* that euthanasia would represent a Promethean attitude in which human beings *believe themselves to be the masters of life and death*²⁶. The text raises very specific fears in the reader, conflating the legalization of euthanasia with organ trafficking, alleged media manipulation, a tyrannical state, or possible eugenics.

As in other Christian discourses, the document describes euthanasia as a "false compassion,"

contrary to its etymology, or as "perversion"²⁶, thus establishing a morality.

Samaritanus bonus (2020)

Samaritanus bonus, issued more recently, focuses primarily on caring for people in critical and terminal stages. The text emphasizes suffering and a possible interpretation based on the Cross:

*There is also the Cross: an instrument of torture and execution reserved only for the least, which, in its symbolic significance, closely resembles those diseases that confine a person to a bed, prefigure only death, and seem to deprive time and its passing of meaning*²⁷.

Rather than addressing euthanasia directly, the document interprets the argument regarding quality of life as if, from an ethical standpoint, a chronic health condition was considered negative or unbearable, demonstrating a problematic shift in argument and insufficient knowledge of legislative proposals surrounding this issue²⁸. Finally, the text states that the possibility of legislating on euthanasia would be a kind of "saving oneself," accusing those who advocate for the legislative regulation of this practice of being neo-Pelagians and neo-Gnostics. In doing so, the Roman Church reactivates heresiological categories from the first centuries of Christianity as a way of expressing its doctrinal resistance to the legal regulation of euthanasia.

Based on the review of these texts, it is possible to identify a moralizing stance on the part of hegemonic Christianity, which focuses on belief in a divinity without sufficiently understanding or valuing human freedom, another fundamental element of its doctrine. Finally, it remains important to denounce how the Roman Church sees itself as the only authority capable of interpreting the idea of compassion, another form of superiority that is discursively defended in its documents.

Christian narratives on euthanasia from the perspective of critical bioethics

In the previous section, what can be called, in the Foucauldian sense, discourse was developed.

I consider it important to distinguish the official Christian position expressed in documents from the different forms that sustain it through what are referred to as narratives²⁹. The latter are more widely used and are not necessarily outside academic theological discussion, except in a subordinate way. With this in mind, two of them will be addressed. Both are relevant to this study because they not only express a belief, but also condition how many people deliberate on autonomy, suffering, guilt, and end-of-life care.

God gives life and is its Lord

This expression is very common in debates on euthanasia and is based on the religious belief in the existence of a creator to whom a series of attributes and forms are ascribed. The narrative is based on the total dependence on a deity who, in a later narrative, is said to have created a human soul. This theological construct proposes humanity's total dependence on the idea of belonging. In addition to the aforementioned passage from Exodus, the following can be added: *The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world and all who dwell in it*³⁰. The bioethical problem is not that a person of faith understands their own life as a gift, but rather that this understanding is transferred to the public sphere as an argument to deny the decision of those who do not share the same religious framework or of those who, even if they do, interpret their relationship with God, life, and death differently.

But the issue lies not only in this idea, but also in the fact that this type of text is read, interpreted, and authorized endogamously by men³¹, who would maintain control. The idea of a patriarchal God is upheld by and for a patriarchal institution that venerates a male, bourgeois, white, and heterosexual God, made in the image and likeness of modern man³². Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza called this experience of domination "kyriarchy," as it would not be based on the power of the father, but on the notion of man as *kyriós*, that is, as lord³³.

This dependence can be observed in an argument that is not bioethical, but rather a Catholic "theoethics" that imposes a way of understanding human action based on this institutional framework,

for example, when it states: *the human person, in life and in death, depends entirely on God, with whom they maintain an essential relationship from which they can never withdraw*³⁴. Far from promoting interpersonal autonomy in relation to any deity, it suppresses the will by relying on decontextualized biblical texts.

A social bioethics perspective, as argued by Sapag-Hagar, would be based on considering the person within their social relationships, taking into account that decision-making involves several horizontal factors related to peers and vertical factors involving the State, as well as public health and culture⁶, in which the religious aspect could not be ignored. This exposes panoptic surveillance³⁵, which I would like to illustrate with a verse from my personal experience that I heard during my adolescence:

Just look, God watches over you, watches you, and you don't know how much. Just look, you will die and you don't know when.

In this sense, it is important to recognize the individual moral imperatives we hear and that, whether or not we accept them, impose a way of acting under surveillance, restricting autonomy. However, it is also necessary to add what Cohen calls moral panics, which are presented as a *threat to society's values and interests*³⁶ and can lead to even greater surveillance within social groups. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*³⁷ portrays a dystopia in this regard, but there are several historical examples that can be found in the Middle Ages and in what it meant to move beyond them.

Suffering saves

Pain and suffering are part of a Christian narrative that is deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of our continent through the image of Christ's passion. It is easy to forget that, from a historical perspective, it was a murder³⁸, but due to the religious narrative established since the arrival of Christianity in our land, this event has been treated in an idealized way and as a transaction. In fact, shortly after the genocide on our continent, a German monk, Dr. Martin Luther, questioned the economic policies of the Roman Church, which certainly relied on indulgences, since this institution considered itself the administrator of

the treasures of faith, that is, the sufferings of its Christ and the merits of the saints³⁹.

Just as the cross would have been an instrument of salvation, pain and suffering, according to Christian discourse and the narratives that derive from it, would contribute to a kind of divine plan. Christian opposition identifies in today's culture, called a "culture of death" by John Paul II or a "throwaway culture" by Francis, a rejection of *pain and suffering* [as they] *mainly carry a "devaluing" burden, thus provoking their rejection*⁴⁰, and, therefore, suffering would become an element of salvation.

The different cases presented by Catholic theoethicists (experts in theological ethics) certainly raise the possibility that a person may choose not to use opioids or painkillers for personal reasons, whether familial or religious. This situation would be an exercise of autonomy. However, it also overlooks that exercising this principle requires recognizing that autonomy is relational, since *people constitute themselves as such in a context of interdependence*^{41,42}, which also involves considering the emotional environment, since the pain and suffering of a loved one imply pain and suffering for those directly involved, especially for primary caregivers, who, due to the burden of caregiving, also do not receive care or support.

This narrative of pain and suffering, like other similar scenarios, must be recognized as a secularized argument, such as the "no pain, no gain" motto of the bodybuilding world or the "without pain, you are not happy" idea in popular culture. These expressions should be evaluated more in terms of care than of the principles of justice and autonomy, because care is not the same as sacrifice⁴³ and is not something that would be necessary. From this perspective, caring does not mean prolonging suffering or requiring a person to turn their pain into a virtue, but rather supporting decision-making processes in which relief, awareness, connection, and dignity can be considered without guilt.

The Catholicizing idea disseminated throughout our continent overlooks the fact that Jesus is considered the only redeemer and that there is no other, and this dynamic ignores the injustice suffered by this historical figure. Regarding Christian narratives of love, care, science, and democracy, I argued some time ago that there

is a need to unmask the hatred, control, religion, and theocracy behind them, inviting, from a queer theory perspective, their exposure⁵.

This supposed union of pain with *the redemptive sacrifice that He [Jesus] offered in obedience to the Father's will*²⁵ is a Pauline interpretation that has caused harm because, instead of questioning the historical causes that lead to injustice, it has subordinated everything to an inscrutable divine will, interpreted by men who, due to their privileges, believe they can speak about issues unrelated to real life. In this sense, the spiritual support offered in palliative care does not aim to associate personal pain with the suffering of any Christ, but rather to be an instrument for people to become aware of their lives based on recognition and gratitude.

There is no salvation in pain or suffering. And a deity that takes pleasure in them is not worthy of faith. What can actually exist is an attitude towards pain and suffering that enables a deep dialogue about one's own existence.

In conclusion: believing in eternal life and dying with dignity

From a heterodox and non-hegemonic perspective, which I prefer to call post-Christian⁴⁴, I would like to return to the title of this article. Eternal life is a theological construct that has emphasized temporality while neglecting hope. The biblical verse John 10:10 states that Jesus' alleged mission is for people to have "life in abundance." *Postmortem* eschatological interpretations placed this abundance in a promised heaven and, historically, served to manipulate consciences; however, the Greek term for "life" [ζωήν, *zōēn*] used in this passage does not refer to any world beyond this life. The non-canonical Peshitta translation, an Aramaic version of the Bible dated to around the fifth century and relevant to interpreting the Gospels in the language historically attributed to Jesus, makes it possible for this reading to be nuanced by proposing "that they may have the best" rather than "life in abundance"⁴⁵.

The meaning of life does not consist in freeing oneself from it. This idea is closer to a Socratic perspective, spread by the union of Christianity

with Neoplatonism as a way of surviving and remaining in the public sphere, than to the historical understanding of Jesus' historical message. The analysis presented thus far has involved a critique of Christian institutions—therefore, a gender critique⁴⁶—that have conditioned fears about the beginning of the person and anxieties about the end of his life, imposing a moral burden, associated with the idea of sin, on matters over which one does not have absolute control. As an ancient Latin proverb states—*De internis necque Ecclesiae*—not even the Church can claim dominion over the inner self. Therefore, believing in eternal life and dying with dignity are not contradictory, but rather an opportunity to reflect on a decisive act regarding one's own life, an act that no institution should deny, since life itself should not be the only source of support, and this does not deny eternal life because, if it is eternal, it has already begun. In this sense, dying with dignity becomes an imperative of humanity:

*Regarding illness and therapy, based on the reality of God, it is possible to ground what, without God, could certainly be defended, but never legitimized in an indisputable, unconditional, and universally binding way: The imperatives of humanity!*⁴⁷

This would imply considering an ethics that is not associated with the experience of any divinity, but rather with the concreteness of existence and a secular social experience. Therefore, it is also important to remember that churches' statements

regarding euthanasia are binding only on those who follow these denominations and no one else. Their interpretations, modifications, or changes do not bind the political community, of which they are, in fact, part, but they neither decisive nor should they be.

Thus, hegemonic Christianity's opposition to euthanasia operates based on three interconnected movements: a selective reading of the Bible, an institutional doctrine that moralizes autonomy, and a narrative of suffering that tends to turn suffering into a virtue. Discussing these movements does not mean denying the plurality of Christianity, but rather preventing one of its hegemonic forms from presenting itself as the only possible religious voice on the end of life.

Those who are not part of these religious frameworks are governed by different political constitutions intended for all people who inhabit these lands. Hence, it is essential to recognize other Christian discourses that have been overshadowed, rendered invisible, and delegitimized by hegemony, and to engage with them. This also means recognizing the alarmist approach adopted by Christian institutions toward euthanasia, associating it with eugenic purposes and frightening the families of older adults or individuals with complex health conditions⁴⁵, and, above all, guiding regulation toward greater care for both healthcare professionals and people experiencing suffering and their families, because if one truly believes in eternal life, it does not end with death and cannot be controlled by fear.

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