

## **‘Thou shalt not kill.’ Is this true in every case?**

### **Introduction**

‘Thou shalt not kill’ is generally recognised as being from the Ten Commandments given by Moses to the children of Israel at Mount Sinai. As such, it has been taught as a moral injunction to many millions down the centuries whom have shared the Judeo-Christian worldview. The force of the injunction has always been seen to be a strong rejection of the taking of human life. However, even taken within its original context it can never be seen as an absolute injunction against the taking of life. This essay examines some of the issues that surround the interpretation of the commandment.

The first issue of substance must of course be the original context of the commandment and the wider context of the priestly and Levitical tradition of which it was part. It is clear from subsequent passages in both Exodus and Leviticus (e.g. Ex 21, Lev 21) that an absolute prohibition on the taking of human life was certainly not what was intended by the commandment. The named passages implied an ethical imperative on the population to end the life of the guilty under a range of circumstances from sexual sin to verbal assault against parents. In light of these examples of judicial killing and the precise Hebrew word used in the commandment, some have sought to emphasise the concept of *intent* of the action and would rather render the commandment as ‘thou shalt not murder’.

This guiding principle of intent is widely recognised within ethics:

‘...every society known to us subscribes to some...principles prohibiting the taking of life...Judaism and the rise of Christianity contributed to the general feeling that human life has sanctity and must not deliberately be taken.’<sup>1</sup>

‘...especially in theological circles...it is widely accepted that the moral character of an act is principally determined by the intention which defines its inherent nature.’<sup>2</sup>

The interpretation in relation to the precise context of application, e.g. ‘War and Peace’, euthanasia or abortion has and continues to be strongly debated amongst ethicists and philosophers. Whilst most would permit some use of violence and killing in war there nevertheless remain conscientious objectors and pacifist movements that are apparently ‘absolutist’<sup>3</sup> in their application of the non-killing principle. However, such absolutism is difficult to maintain as a pure logical concept even amongst pacifists. Gandhi, whom was seen as a pioneer of non-violent direct action and a model for pacifists worldwide, is said to have foreseen circumstances in which violent direct action would be permissible and even lent direct support to particular armed uprisings<sup>4</sup>. He chose non-violent direct action because it was the most effective political tool to achieve the desired end result. His success was not replicated by Western movements that adopted his methods for primarily ideological reasoning

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<sup>1</sup> Kuhse, H., ‘Euthanasia’, *A Companion to Ethics*, Singer, P. (Ed), Oxford: 1991, p294.

<sup>2</sup> McMahan, J., ‘War and Peace’, *A Companion to Ethics*, Singer, P. (Ed), Oxford: 1991, p391.

<sup>3</sup> McMahan, J., ‘War and Peace’, *A Companion to Ethics*, Singer, P. (Ed), Oxford: 1991, p384.

<sup>4</sup> Bishop, P.D., ‘War, Peace-Keeping, and Ethical Decisions’, *New Occasions Teach New Duties*, Rodd, C.S. (Ed), Edinburgh: 1995, pp134-135.

based on a misinterpretation of Gandhi's own ideology. For most movements and ethical debates, there is the 'middle ground' between the absolutist prohibition of killing and the nihilistic rejection of any moral principle beyond those of individual self-interest.

For example, when deciding on the justification for violence and killing in a political context of conflict, frequent reference has been made to the 'just war' concept that clearly had its origin in Christian theology:

'Beginning with Ambrose, strengthened by Augustine, and elaborated by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century and others later, the very ancient notion of the 'just war' was steadily refined...'<sup>5</sup>

The concept has two parts dealing with the justification for going to war ('jus ad bellum') and then the appropriate conduct of the war ('jus in bello'). In brief, the justification of going to war is that it is the only way remaining way in which justice may be served. The war is then conducted with a view of being discriminatory between the innocent and the guilty and with the use of proportionate force against the aggressor.

Thus, with this specific example, even when these qualifications may be seen in practice to be 'hopelessly unrealistic'<sup>6</sup> there seems to be the intention and necessity to assess the consequences of going to war. This tension between the theory and practice of qualification to the primary concept is common to

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<sup>5</sup> Jones, R.G., 'Peace, Violence and War', *Christian Ethics An Introduction*, Hoose, B. (Ed), London: 1998, p210.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p211.

most fields of human activity but most obviously in the debates surrounding euthanasia and abortion. Warren is keen to provide such a consequentialist justification for abortion in stark terms:

'If actions are to be morally evaluated by their consequences, then a strong case can be made that the prohibition of abortion is wrong.

Throughout history women have paid a terrible price for the absence of safe and legal contraception and abortion. Forced to bear many children...they..died [and still die] young.'<sup>7</sup>

Her subsequent analysis is interesting in that it shows how basic biology, consequences for society at large, the economic implications for the woman and her family are all factors that can be used to mitigate the prohibition of killing. Even the most basic of arguments, the 'reverence for all life' as advanced by Schweitzer, the passionate opponent of abortion, is not necessarily invulnerable to qualification in this strict logical sense:

'Reverence for life suggests that, other things being equal, it is always better to avoid killing a living thing. Schweitzer was aware that not all killing can be avoided...one should never kill without good reason...it does not follow from an ethic of reverence for all life that abortion is morally wrong...many abortions may be defended as killing 'under the compulsion of necessity'.<sup>8</sup>

With abortion and with euthanasia it is also a matter of balancing 'rights' of two conflicting parties. The principles of moral philosophy are continually

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<sup>7</sup> Warren, M. A., 'Abortion', *A Companion to Ethics*, Singer, P. (Ed), Oxford: 1991, p303.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p307.

concerned with critiquing the process and factors of resolving such conflicts.

Two important concepts are *personhood* and *sentience*.

Both concepts refer to the preservation of basic rights such as the right to liberty, life and self-determination which are beyond those 'special' rights granted legally or by promise. By personhood, it is taken to mean that a 'person' is defined as a special entity that will have rights because of this designation. Some ascribe personhood basically to the 'human' condition preventing any qualification that a person is required to be 'rational' as in neo-Kantian ethics. The reason for this is to prevent the arbitrary abortion of the handicapped or involuntary euthanasia of the senile that have lost their cognisance or perceived utility to society. Sentience is a complimentary concept taken to mean that a person will have rights when they are capable of feeling pleasure or pain. Within the strict utilitarian definition of ethics, the ability of a person to feel pleasure or pain means that their happiness matters and so their rights need to be considered.

Euthanasia too centres round definitions of what it means to be 'merciful' and the 'right to die'. These concepts are necessarily world-view conditioned. A patient that expects to be able to request that a doctor may administer a fatal injection or overdose of medication may be violating the doctor's own individual conscience and moving beyond what it is right and proper for the physician to be expected to do:

'physicians that euthanize or assist in suicide have moved beyond medicine's proper realm of promoting and preserving health and into the

metaphysical realm of determining the value of life and what kind of lives are worth living...To enlist a physician in achieving release from a meaningless life of suffering presumes the physician is competent to judge...'<sup>9</sup>

It is thus plain that the *medical* condition of the patient is not the only factor and the patient's expressed wishes are not primary. The patient's psychological state is also important. It is argued that euthanasia may be seen as an attractive option because of depression on the part of the patient or suggested by greedy relatives that would profit from the death of the patient. The traditional Christian position, reinterpreted by Kant in terms of reason rather than religion, would also see that a man would never have the right to take his own life. To allow men to have this right would be dangerous for society as a whole. It is not just an issue of personal autonomy as it will necessarily involve another, 'euthanasia is a social decision...the practice...weaken[s] the general prohibition against killing...so we end up valuing life less.'<sup>10</sup> When society decides to kill a man, it is because the wider requirements of justice and righteousness, an overriding moral imperative, demands it.

## Conclusion

It has been shown that the statement 'thou shalt not kill' is not a universal statement that can be applied without qualification. Reference needs to be

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<sup>9</sup> Gula, R., 'Euthanasia', *Christian Ethics An Introduction*, Hoose, B. (Ed), London:1998, pp284-285.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p281.

made to both the scientific or naturalistic disciplines and the philosophical and religious domains. Concepts of justice and personhood and autonomy of the individual are important to determine the application of the principle as are the wider considerations of the benefits to society as a whole. It is important to distinguish between the general desirability of the action and the factors that mitigate the necessity of the action.

Finally, to assert that a single position is authoritatively 'Christian' is dangerous. The application needs to be continually evaluated within the specific culture and context, carefully evaluated against the scriptural tradition which both permits and prohibits killing.

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