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Rights Talk Right to Death — Euthanasia and “Religious Primitivism”

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Several years ago, Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon offered the persuasive argument that America has embraced what she calls “rights talk.” The assertion of rights is now the standard way to effect social change or, in the case of individuals, to have your own way. “Rights talk” is what remains when a cultural consensus about right and wrong evaporates.

Fast-forward to 2008 and rights talk is, if anything, even more ingrained in the American character. Battles over competing and conflicting assertions of rights now emerge over some of the hottest and most contentious issues of the day. When we have run out of other arguments, all we have left is to assert that what we demand is, after all, only our right.



Is there an end-game to all this? Well, in one sense we can see evidence of the end game in a recent article published in Great Britain. Writing in *The Guardian* [London], Simon Jenkins argues that the right to end one’s life on one’s own terms is basic to humanity, and that only “religious primitivism” stands in the way of cultural acceptance and legal approval for assisted suicide.

“There cannot be a human freedom so personal as ordering the circumstances of one’s death,” Jenkins argues. “Yet Britain is instinctively collectivist, enveloped in prejudice, religion, taboo and prohibition.”

Britain decriminalized suicide in 1961, but it remains a crime to assist another to commit suicide. Simon Jenkins finds this intolerable. “Only the most warped collectivist could argue that individuals must be kept alive against their will,” he insists.

In order to make his case, Jenkins tells the story of Daniel James, a 23-year-old rugby player whose parents took him to Switzerland in order to assist his suicide. James had been seriously injured and no longer wanted to live in his state of incapacity. He demanded assisted suicide, but this is illegal in Britain. Giving him what he demanded, his parents took him to Dignitas clinic in Switzerland.

Look carefully at how he explains the case:

The James case, now also under judicial consideration, breaks new ground. The young man’s condition was certainly not terminal and his mental state was clear. After a number of failed attempts at suicide, he expressed his wish to escape from “the prison” of his crippled body. He did not want to continue “what he felt was a second-class existence ... in fear and loathing”.

He asserted his desire to do something perfectly legal, to take his own life, but was impeded by his disability from doing so. His parents freed him from that impediment. To prosecute them would be an outrage.

The young man wanted to die, but his condition “was certainly not terminal.” In other words, he was not satisfied with his physical condition, but he was not dying. Not until his parents assisted his suicide, that is.

Simon Jenkins writes of young Daniel James wanting “to do something perfectly legal.” That is a cold and breathtakingly callous way of talking about suicide. Does Jenkins celebrate suicide as an ultimate act of self-expression and the exercise of personal rights? It would seem hard for him to escape this conclusion. If so, he is a prophet of the Culture of Death. The claim of a “right” to demand assisted suicide is evidence of what the late Malcolm Muggeridge called “the great liberal death wish.”

Look also at this interesting section of his essay:

A leading authority on euthanasia, Professor Emily Jackson of the LSE [London School of Economics], began a recent lecture on the subject with the sensational question: “What is the most common cause of death in Britain?” Her answer was “death by killing”. And who does the killing? “Doctors.” One third of all registered deaths are by deliberate morphine overdose and one third by the removal of life support, premeditated acts by medical staff.

So “death by killing” is to be understood as a great cultural achievement? Who decides who shall live and who shall die? When is enough, enough? Are economic concerns taken into account? Who gains by the death? What does this say about how we value life? Who gave humanity this authority?

Simon Jenkins, like so many elitists pushing policy proposals, demands that judges do the work of legalizing the “right” to assisted suicide. “Yet again we must turn to judges rather than members of parliament to uphold a modern liberty,” he laments. Well, if the British people demanded this “modern liberty,” their elected representatives would respond to that demand. But this is not the case. Jenkins, who knows a “modern liberty” when he sees one, demands that judges now take the question out of the hands of the Parliament — and thus out of the hands of the people.

Why would anyone oppose assisted suicide and euthanasia? Jenkins ascribes it all to “religious primitivism.” Well, the Christian worldview is all that stands as a major obstacle to the Culture of Death. “This hangover of religious primitivism must surely end,” he declares. How would he end it? Well, he would suggest an assisted suicide, no doubt.

