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A Pact With Death? Why the Christian Worldview Matters

Jenni Murray has made her pact with death. The popular and controversial presenter of "Woman's Hour," a popular program on the BBC, stated her views on a recent television program called "Don't Get Me Started," broadcast in Great Britain. Murray, who is a member of the Order of the British Empire, announced on the program that she had entered into a "suicide pact" with two friends who agreed to kill each other if illness or incapacity should leave them unable to commit suicide. Today, Dr. Mohler considers the worldview that would lead to such an understanding of human life—and human death.

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"When my time comes I want to be able to decide about my destiny," Murray stated, offering her own "personal rant" about the issues of euthanasia, assisted suicide, and mercy killing. Murray's two friends, Sally Feldman and Jane Wilton, discussed how they came to this conclusion and then agreed to seal their pact with a formal document of agreement.

As the friends discussed their plans to end each other's lives, Feldman told Murray that she would be willing to help her die only if she were suffering extreme pain or had "lost her marbles." According to *The Times* [London], Murray, Feldman, and Wilton discussed possible methods of bringing about death such as "injections or smothering one another with a pillow."

In delivering her "personal rant" Murray complained that assisted suicide is illegal in Great Britain only because it is demanded by a "religious minority" who hold to outdated views concerning the value of human life. Furthermore, this "religious minority" also holds to the quaint belief that children have a moral obligation to care for elderly parents.

Murray began her argument by suggesting that she did not want to be a burden to her own two children as she reaches advanced years. Nevertheless, she shocked her television audience by suggesting that she does not want to be "trapped" into caring for her own mother who is currently ill with Parkinson's disease.

In response to controversy, a BBC spokesperson said: "Jenni is angry that, having fought so hard to become liberated and independent, woman are now being trapped into caring for dependent parents."

Without doubt, this dimension of Murray's argument—and the revealing statement released by the BBC—demonstrates the true nature of her pact with death. It is not just about ending her own life, but the obligation of others to die and get out of the way, lest they interfere with her own life plans.

Increasingly, arguments for "assisted suicide" and euthanasia are moving from claims of a supposed "right" to die to an obligation to die. The argument reflects the fact that, according to its proponents, an inordinate percentage of medical costs are directed towards the end stages of terminal diseases and the final years of life. With a rapidly aging population, the escalation of these costs is a fact that must be faced by all advanced societies.

Beyond this, the developing argument for a “duty to die” moves directly toward the concerns of Jenni Murray—concerns related to lifestyle issues and the question of whether there is any obligation to care for dependent parents.

Controversies over assisted suicide and euthanasia are now raging on both sides of the Atlantic. Of course, there are plenty of intellectuals and professional bioethicists ready to help make the case for a right or obligation to end one’s life.

In Great Britain, the most significant of these advocates is Mary Warnock, one of Britain’s most influential philosophers and, since 1985, Baroness Warnock of Weeke.

Warnock first came to international attention when she served as chair of the official British committee that established the basic framework for rules on in vitro fertilization in 1984. Now, after establishing herself as a major secular figure pushing the limits of modern morality, she has turned to the question of euthanasia and suicide.

In an interview published in *Philosophy Now*, Baroness Warnock declares that “it is high time that people spoke honestly about assisted dying.” In her view, the law ought to be changed so that persons can gain legal assistance in committing suicide. “What horrifies me most is that people, mostly old people, who are not competent anymore, are just allowed to wither away,” she stated. “Nobody has any policy about this at all; it just happens.”

Of course, there is a current policy—a policy that declares assisted suicide to be illegal. Speaking of herself, Baroness Warnock revealed that she would rather commit suicide than die in a “very slow process.”

In her own words: “I simply couldn’t bear to get into the position where my children began to feel, ‘Oh God, I think we better go and see her.’ I couldn’t bear it. And I see no point in living if one were ga-ga. I wouldn’t want to. One way or another I’d much rather die.”

For a woman whose academic work is marked by specificity and careful argument, this is particularly slippery. What is the medical definition of “ga-ga?”

Apparently, Baroness Warnock is, at least for now, ready to let individuals decide if they are burdens or not. But, she concedes that some elderly persons may feel the need to end their own lives, feeling, rightly or wrongly, that they have become a burden to their families.

When asked about the possibility that an elderly person might wrongly believe they are considered to be a burden by their families, Baroness Warnock responded: “This is one of those ‘slippery slope’ arguments. One can’t rule it out that they might feel they ought to. But then, I don’t know if that’s such a terribly bad outcome, because their family if they’re nice will say ‘you’re not a burden’ even if they are really. I don’t see why people should particularly want to stay alive if they’re not enjoying themselves. But if they are enjoying themselves, put up with it. I think that’s the criterion I’d use.”

In Baroness Warnock’s view, “I don’t think people any longer ought to *suppose* they should go on living the whole of their possible natural lives, because we all live so much longer these days.”

In Baroness Mary Warnock, we meet the face of the modern secular worldview. She is undoubtedly intelligent and clever, having served in a variety of illustrious and respected positions in academia and public life. There are few issues of public policy and debate in Great Britain which are not marked by her influence or leadership.

Interestingly, on the issue of assisted suicide Baroness Warnock is uncomfortable with the idea of a “right” to die. In her view, rights do not exist unless they are written into the positive law.

In other words, she rejects the entire structure of natural law argument, suggesting that there are virtually no natural rights. Of course, given the fact that she denies any divine or natural law, she is put in a position of great difficulty when she suggests that there is any basic “ought” to a moral question. In the end, the Baroness seems to suggest that euthanasia should not be a debate over either religion or rights. Instead, persons should simply be allowed this option, perhaps in light of the larger social obligation.

“I believe that people who are competent and suffering and who say they want to die should be able to do so, but I don’t think I base that belief on their autonomy, or not in any very general sense,” she insists. “I think that the decision

should be theirs because they are the people who are suffering.” Finally, “I’m not particularly keen on a morality of rights anyway: given the many conflicting rights, one doesn’t quite know what one can claim as a right.”

In her view, objections to euthanasia or assisted suicide must be rooted in some form of religious argument. “I know a lot of people have religious objections to it, and of course they’re entitled to them; but I don’t see any reason why the religious view should be imposed on the people who aren’t religious.” In other words, a secular view should simply be imposed upon public policy. Yet, the most basic question remains: how can one construct a workable policy on a matter as significant as human dignity from an entirely secular worldview?

Moving beyond these questions, Baroness Warnock even suggests that the medical profession has “had too much input into the whole discussion.” As she sees it, the crucial issues are not medical, but social. In an article published in *The Guardian* [London], Baroness Warnock complained that many medical doctors seemed to be squeamish about the issue of assisted suicide. Indeed, the vast majority of British doctors are publicly opposed to current efforts to legalize euthanasia and assisted suicide.

As Baroness Warnock recalled, “One imminent physician to whom I spoke said: ‘I would not be able to do it. I am programmed not to kill.’” Responding with the case of an elderly person who wished to have her ventilator turned off, Baroness Warnock stated this: “We should be grateful to the medical profession that, on the whole, we can trust them to try to keep us alive rather than kill us. Yet there is something chilling about a doctor ‘programmed’ to disregard the serious desire of an intelligent and far-sighted woman, even though compliance with her wish has been deemed lawful.”

These arguments reveal the great divide that separates the modern secular mind and the Christian worldview. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a more unbridgeable gulf than that which stands between the belief that human beings, made in the image of God, possess both an inherent right to natural life and an obligation to care for others and, on the other hand, the view that some lives are simply not worth living or keeping alive.

Jenni Murray and Baroness Mary Warnock know exactly what they mean to argue. Murray’s suicide pact and Warnock’s public argument may indicate a shift in public opinion in both Great Britain and the United States. Will individuals understand what is at stake when Baroness Warnock declares, “In other contexts sacrificing oneself for one’s family would be considered good. I don’t see what is so horrible about the motive of not wanting to be an increasing nuisance . . . I am not ashamed to say some lives are more worth living than others?” Will the viewers of Jenni Murray’s television program rise up in indignation when she declares that she does not want to be “trapped” into caring for her mother? Will the BBC face outrage when its spokesperson defends this statement by suggesting that the care of elderly parents threatens to limit the lifestyles and professional careers of “liberated and independent” women?

All that remains to be seen, though this debate seems to be taking an ominous turn on both sides of the Atlantic. In the meantime, these arguments should demand the attention of all persons who believe in the inherent dignity of human life. We are witnessing the embrace of a pact with death.

