

Death: A Friend to be Welcomed, Not an Enemy to be Defeated

An address to the National Convention of the Hemlock Society in San Diego, California, on Saturday, January 10, 2003.

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I am both honored and delighted to speak to this national gathering of the Hemlock Society. It is a rare experience for a bishop of the Christian Church to be invited to address this group. It is probably rarer still for a bishop to accept such an invitation. There appears to be a deep and enduring division between the principles of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which is the dominant shaping religious force in Western civilization, and the principles espoused by the Hemlock Society. In fact, these two sets of principles are usually seen as mutually exclusive. Yet, I stand before you today as one who has found a way to embrace the truth arising from both traditions.

I am a practicing Christian, an ordained minister, and an elected bishop in my church. Indeed, when I retired three years ago, I was the senior active bishop in the Episcopal Church in the United States in point of service. That represents a long career in a position of major leadership. Yet, at the same time, I deeply support physician-assisted suicide. I believe that if and when a person arrives at that point in human existence when death has become a kinder, alternative than hopeless pain, and when a chronic dependency on narcotics begins to require the loss of personal dignity, then the basic human right to choose how and when to die should be guaranteed by law and respected by our communities of faith.

I have spoken publicly in favor of this conviction for years but always as an apparently lone voice in my church. Yet following a year of study, my Episcopal Diocese of Newark, which covers all of Northern New Jersey, meeting in its annual convention in 1996, endorsed, by a 2 to 1 majority, physician-assisted suicide as a moral option for Christians.* That convention was made up of 600 people; approximately 450 were elected lay people and 150 were ordained clergy from our various and diverse congregations. This was the first time, of which I am aware, that an official body within a mainline Christian Church in the United States of America had taken an official stand on this question. Empowered by that witness, I testified, as the leader of that Diocese, before a House of Representatives Committee of the Congress of the United States in Washington stating my support for making this a legal right for all of our citizens. The Congress regrettably did not agree with me.

Later, the Supreme Court of the United States, by a 9 to 0 majority, refused even to open this subject for debate by providing us with a minority opinion. So there is work to be done, vast amounts of work. Our task is to educate the public, the lawmakers, and the judges of this nation as to the rightness of this cause. Our ability to turn the opinion of the religious communities of this nation on this subject will be a major task in that educational process. I hope this address at this gathering will inaugurate that vital campaign.

I want to assist this audience and through this audience to assist the listening world to understand the sources of the religious negativity that hover around all of the end-of-life issues. Then I want to propose a way in which this negativity can be addressed and hopefully changed. Because I am both a Christian and a supporter of the right to determine how and when I will die, I want to demonstrate that one does not have to abandon a traditional religious commitment in order to embrace what I now regard as a compelling new freedom. Indeed I seek to present myself to you as a living illustration that a person can join together the principles of the Hemlock Society with the Christian conviction that life is ultimately holy. That is not an easy assignment in either camp. I will doubtless be forced to defend my very presence in this assembly to the majority of those who live in my faith community. I suspect that many of you will have to defend your willingness to invite a bishop to address this conference to the majority of your constituents. So let me begin that defense.

The Judeo-Christian faith story opens with the assertion of life's sanctity. The creation narrative presents us with a portrait of human life as being made in the divine image. Christians have derived from this assertion that the power to live or to die is not a decision that properly resides in human beings. That power, it is typically said, belongs to God alone. Therefore, the traditional Christian concludes, no one can be given the liberty of ending his or her life under any circumstances.

That principle permeates Christian thinking. Yet, a look at Christian history will reveal that it has been randomly and inconsistently applied.

In the course of that history, we Christians have not left the power to die exclusively in God's hands. Rather, we have fought religious wars in which people were killed quite deliberately. God did not kill them; human beings, who called themselves Christians, did. Many of our victims were people of other religious convictions. We have justified these political acts of violence with elaborate arguments about what constitutes a 'just war.' I do not want to argue on this occasion either the 'pacifist'

position or the 'just war' position. I simply want to note that in this area, Christians have not left the power of life and death in God's hands alone. We have rather abrogated this power to ourselves.

We have also employed the practice of capital punishment in the Christian nations of the Western world for almost all our history. It is only recently, and quite frankly in the more secularized nations of Western Europe, that the debate on the morality of capital punishment has led some nations to ban this practice as cruel and inhumane punishment. But the records of history show that Christian rulers in Christian nations, aided and abetted by the prevailing religious hierarchies of the Christian churches, have shown no reluctance whatsoever in claiming the right to take the power of life and death from God's hands and to place that power squarely into their own very human hands.

Christians have, over the years of their history, used their power to execute their critics again and again as part of their way of enforcing religious beliefs. A man named Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in 1600 by the religious authorities of his day because he taught that the earth was not the center of the universe. That was, of course, a point of view contrary to the prevailing Christian synthesis.

The Inquisition used the same tactic at many different fiery stakes to execute thousands of human beings for the sin of heresy or for the 'crime,' as they thought of it, of being a Jew. The Crusades, officially sponsored by the Vatican, also caused the death of many Jews in Europe because Jews were the only "infidels" that the Crusaders could locate when their romantic journeys to free the holy land from such nonbelievers failed to reach its destination.

The Christian Church has also enforced the ignorance of its prejudice against homosexual persons by having so many of them burned at the stake that the little stick which ignited the fire, called a "faggot," became a derisive slang word for a homosexual victim. With a history like that, it is hard to take seriously the religious claims that issues of life and death must remain in God's hands, and that this is not an arena for human decision-making.

If human beings who call themselves Christians have no scruples about endorsing war, killing religious enemies, or imposing the sentence of death upon those who violate either the norms of faith or the boundaries of prejudice under a set of circumstances in the past, is it still appropriate for Christians to suggest that one cannot elect death for himself or herself under a different set of circumstances in the present? It seems to me that a

certain irrational inconsistency is operating here, which needs to be pointed out to any faith community that espouses such claims.

But in each of these historical instances which I have cited, it will be quickly argued that the people who did these things were motivated, perhaps sometimes mistakenly but nonetheless sincerely, by their commitment to the sacredness of life. It was not, they will say, that the principle under which they were acting was wrong but rather that it was applied improperly. In warfare, they will contend, it was the desire to save life that caused Christians to take up arms against a supposed enemy who threatened their life. In state-ordered or even church-ordered executions, the goal was to protect the lives of the citizens by dispatching permanently those who were guilty of violating what were assumed to be the ultimate boundaries on humanity. This extreme punishment was justified as the only way that could guarantee that these victims would never violate life again.

Even in religious persecutions, it will be argued, lives were snuffed out because those in authority determined that the continued existence of heresy or heretics would lead people astray and thus violate the ultimate sacredness of life. So as dreadful and wrong as this inquisitional behavior now seems to have been to the enlightened people of today, it could still be argued, my critics will say, that this behavior was nonetheless deemed to have been done in the service of affirming life's sacredness. One cannot therefore suggest, they will say, that these illustrations could be properly used to pretend that human beings have the right to take their own lives under any set of circumstances.

Suicide, they contend, is always wrong, always a violation of the holiness of life and of the God who is the Source of Life. It is an interesting but unconvincing argument. Its weakness is best seen, however, when these same religious people play what has traditionally been their favorite and final trump card. The Bible condemns suicide in any form, they assert.

The most amazing thing about people who seek to end an argument by quoting the authority of the Bible is that most of these quoters are woefully ignorant of the content of the Bible itself. I have discovered in my life that no one is a strict biblical literalist, not even Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson. They are all what I would call 'selective literalists.' They simply ignore those parts of the biblical text that have become inoperative or inconvenient. They quote only those portions of the text which, they assume, buttress their position. It is their attempt to say 'if you disagree with me, you are really disagreeing with God.' Yet history has not treated this religious power play kindly.

The Bible was quoted in the 13th century to support the divine right of kings and to oppose the Magna Carta. The Bible lost. Perhaps you have not noticed that there is no king anywhere in the world today who rules by divine right. If a king or queen rules at all, even symbolically, it is by the consent of the people.

The Bible was quoted in the 17th century to prove that Galileo was wrong and that the sun really did rotate around the earth. The Bible lost. Even the Vatican in 1992 admitted that Galileo had been right and the Church had been wrong. It was 400 years too late, but better late than never. Because Galileo was right space travel has become in our day a reality.

The Bible was quoted in the 18th and 19th centuries to justify the institution of slavery. Even the popes have owned slaves. But once again, the Bible lost that battle, and slavery, thank God, has disappeared from the earth. Yet it left behind two bastard stepchildren--segregation and apartheid, and they in turn left a culture of racism with which we are still infected. Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi revealed that so poignantly just a few weeks ago. But the back of racial prejudice has been broken even if some of its effects linger on. The fact, however, remains that the literal Bible has retreated from that fight defeated, chastened and badly wounded but still not yet demolished as a source of destructive power.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the Bible was quoted once again to keep women in positions of second-class citizenship in most of the nations in the Western world. Once again, the Bible lost. Women won the right to vote in this country by constitutional amendment in 1920. Women first entered the cabinet of the president of the United States in the person of Frances Perkins in 1932. Women entered the Congress, the Senate, the governors' mansions, and the Supreme Court as the years of the 20th century rolled on.

They also invaded the world of medicine, law, science, business, the priesthood, corporate boardrooms, and ultimately the ranks of the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, all in that much maligned but still impressive century of progress. The only battle still engaged by the religious community against the emancipation of women is found in the political struggle to ban abortion. That effort is driven by the attempt to give to the, as yet male-controlled, government the right to determine what a woman can do legally with her own body. That too is a losing fight. Only an administration with an ideology more powerful than its desire to stay in office will continue to press that issue. Roe v. Wade is safe even from Attorney General John Ashcroft. He will serve his constituents with

rhetoric only, not with action, because he and the members of the administration he represents know how to count votes.

The Bible was once again quoted in the 20th and 21st centuries to uphold traditional religious prejudice against homosexual people. That is also a fight that the Bible is losing and will lose as medical and scientific evidence mounts daily, making it abundantly clear that sexual orientation is a given and not chosen. Sexual orientation is part of who people are, not what people do. Sexual orientation is thus more like being left-handed than it is about being morally defective. When this definition permeates fully the consciousness of this nation, as it is very close to doing today, then once more ancient prejudice buttressed by biblical quotations will come to an end. The Bible cannot continue to be used in such an ill informed and dramatically wrong way.

So to have the Bible quoted by the religious community today to bring a final solution to all end-of-life discussions is hardly something to be feared. It is only the last gasp of religious imperialism. It needs only to be countered with informed data.

There are only three stories in the Bible about people who committed suicide. One is about King Saul, the predecessor to King David in Jewish history. Saul had been mortally wounded in the battle of Mount Gilboa, when the Jews were fighting against the Philistines. He begged his armor bearer to strike him with his sword to end his suffering and to hasten his inevitable death. When the armor bearer refused, Saul fell on his own sword and ended his life.

The second was a man named Ahithophel, who was one of King David's advisers, who ate daily at the Royal table. Ahithophel betrayed King David, who as king was called "the Lord's anointed." When he was discovered, the text says, he went out and hanged himself.

The third was Judas Iscariot, whose story was clearly shaped by the account of Ahithophel. He also ate at the Lord's table. He also was said to have betrayed one known as "the Lord's anointed." When Judas was discovered, he, like Ahithophel, went out and hanged himself.

The Biblical writers assumed that for Ahithophel and Judas Iscariot, suicide was an appropriate punishment for their crimes. They are surprisingly ambivalent about King Saul.

While the Bible does appear to be generally negative about suicide, it does not seem to condemn those who take somebody else's life. That appears to be true even with the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' as part of its legal code.

If you read the Bible carefully, you will discover that this book prescribes the death penalty for such crimes as worshiping false gods, for being disobedient, for talking back to or cursing your parents, for being a medium, a wizard, or a witch, for committing adultery, and even for having a sexual affair with your mother-in-law. Since few people ever quote this verse about one's mother-in-law, probably because they cannot imagine anyone being guilty of such an act, I share with you that the text is found in Leviticus 20:14.

If life is too sacred for one to seek release from it under any circumstances, does it not also become too sacred to have it taken away by another?

I, as a Christian, believe that life is sacred, that it is the ultimate gift of God. Because I hold this belief, I am committed to living every moment that I am given as deeply, richly and fully as I can. But both the times in which you and I live and the shape of our consciousness in many areas of life have changed dramatically through the ages. Human knowledge has expanded enormously, which means that "new occasions teach new duties," as the poet James Russell Lowell once observed.** I today can no longer just quote the wisdom of antiquity as a passive observer of life. It is not enough just to be a committed Christian; I must also take seriously what it means to be a citizen of the 21st century.

I am the beneficiary of a vast revolution in scientific and medical thinking. I possess a reservoir of data that was not available to the people who authored the Bible. This is the gift of the modern world to me. I have watched life expectancy expand remarkably. I live in a world of quadruple heart bypasses, chemo and radiation therapy, laproscopic surgical procedures and organ transplants, PSA tests and pap smears, miracle drugs and incredible life-support systems. My grandfather died of pneumonia. It was before the development of penicillin. I have had two diseases which I do not believe my grandparents would have survived.

I live in a privileged part of the world and in a privileged generation. I rejoice in all of these human achievements. But let there be no mistake about what is happening. These stirring achievements represent human beings taking on the power we once ascribed only to God. We have, by our own knowledge and expertise, put our hands on the decisions about life and death. We can not now refuse to engage these decisions at

the end of our own lives. We have pushed back the boundaries of death inexorably. We have enabled this generation to live in a way that previous generations could never have imagined. We have watched human life actually evolve to where it must accept God-like responsibilities. The time has come to celebrate that, not to hide from it in the language of piety.

What I see the religious community doing today is to tremble in the face of our own human audacity and to seek to hide from the responsibility inherent in our own human achievements, none of which we would be willing to surrender. Why else would we hesitate before this final boundary called death? Why would we resist so vigorously the reality that now we must take a hand in our death decision? When medical science expands the boundary and the quality of life, Christians do not complain. We, rather, rejoice because we believe it affirms our conviction that life is holy.

It is one thing, however, to expand life and it is quite another to postpone death. When medical science shifts from expanding the length and quality of life and begins simply to postpone the reality of death, why are we not capable of saying that the sacredness of life is no longer being served?

What happens to both our courage and our faith? Is a breathing cadaver, with no hope of restoration, an example of the sacredness of life? I do not think so! Do we human beings, including those of us who claim to be Christian, not have the right to say ‘that is not the way I choose to die?’ I believe we do!

Is death really the enemy as St. Paul once stated? On that definition, so much Christian thinking has been based. Well, let it be said by a bishop of the church: St. Paul was wrong! He was wrong here and in several other places. I often wonder how it was that the words of this man ever came to be called “The Word of God.” When Paul said “I hope those who bother you will mutilate themselves,” was that the word of God? Paul was a child of his era responding to his presuppositions and living with his prejudices. They are not mine. I prefer to think of death not as an enemy but as a friend, even a brother, as St. Francis of Assisi once suggested. The time has therefore come, I believe, for Christians to embrace death not as an enemy to be defeated, but as an aspect of life’s holiness to be embraced. Death is life’s shadow. It walks with us through the entire course of our days. We embrace death as a friend because we honor life. I honor the God of life whom I serve by living fully. I do not honor this God by clinging to a life that has become an empty shell.

I do not honor life when I fail to see that death and finitude are what gives life its precious quality. Death is not punishment for sin, as Paul also once suggested and as

classical Christianity has long maintained. Death is an aspect of life, a vital aspect that gives life its deepest flavor, its defining sensitivity.

Someone once observed that ‘death rings the bell on all procrastination.’ It is because life is finite, not infinite, that we do not postpone the quest for meaning indefinitely. It is because of the presence of death with us on our life’s journey that we do not fail to take the opportunity to say ‘I love you,’ to invest ourselves in primary relationships, to do what needs to be done to build a better world now. Death says you do not have forever to make a difference. Death is what gives conscious life its uniqueness. Remove death from life and life becomes enduring boredom, an endless game of shuffleboard. We make life precious by embracing the reality of death, not by repressing it or denying it. Our present burial customs of making up the faces of the deceased so that they look natural and using artificial grass to cover the dirt of the grave rise out of the fear of our mortality, not out of our affirmation about the wonder and beauty of life.

I, for one, want to live my life by wringing every ounce of joy out of every moment that I am given. I want to expand my life to its fullest extent. That is the way that the sacredness of life is affirmed. I want to drink deeply of life’s sweetness. I want to scale life’s heights and plumb its depths. I want to do all I can do to affirm life and, yes, to postpone death at least until life’s quality has been so compromised that it is no longer life as I believe God created it. Then I want to embrace death as my friend, my companion who has walked with me from the first moment I was born.

I want to live my days surrounded by those I love, able to see my wife’s smiling face, and to experience the joy and vitality of my children and grandchildren. But when those realities begin to fade away, then I want to leave this world, and those I love, with a positive vision. I want them to see in me one who lived and loved deeply and well, until living and loving deeply and well was no longer possible. I want them to remember me as a person who was vital to the end, as one who was in possession of all that makes me who I am, and as one who died well. My deepest desire is always to choose death with dignity over a life that has become either hopelessly painful and dysfunctional or empty and devoid of all meaning.

That is the only way I know that would allow me to honor the God in whose image I believe I was created. That is the way I want to acknowledge the relationship I have had with God, which has grown from a dependent and immature one into the maturity of recognizing that to be human is to share with God in the ultimate life and death decisions. That is how I hope and expect to celebrate both life’s holiness and life’s

Creator. That does not seem to me to be too much to ask of either my faith or my government.

I think this choice should be legal. I will work, therefore, through the political processes to seek to create a world where advance directives are obeyed and where physicians will assist those, who choose to do so, with the ability to die at the appropriate time. I also think the choice to do this should be acclaimed as both moral and ethical, a human right if you will, and I will work through the ecclesiastical processes of my church and all the forces of organized religion to change consciousness, to embrace new realities, and to enable Christians and other people of faith to say that we are compelled in this direction because we believe that God is real and life is holy. The God whom I experience as the Source of Life can surely not be served by those in whom death is simply postponed after real life has departed.

I close with a text, because people seem to believe that a clergyman must have a text for every speech that he or she delivers. In the 10th chapter of John's gospel, these words are attributed to that Jesus of Nazareth, who stands at the center of my faith tradition. Articulating his purpose, He says: "I have come that you might have life and that you might have it abundantly." It is that abundant life which is the ultimate gift of God. I walk into the Source of that abundant life in the way I live. I also want to walk into the Source of that abundant life in the way I die.

I see no contradiction between the faith I cherish and principles for which the Hemlock Society stands. I embrace your conclusions with the hope that you will listen to, heed, and welcome the pathway of faith that I have traveled that enables me to stand at your side today and to claim you as my ally in the struggle to discover the ultimate meaning of life itself. I am a Christian whose faith has led him to champion the legal, moral, and ethical right that I believe every individual should be given—to die with dignity and to have the freedom to choose when and how that dignified death might be accomplished.

John Shelby Spong
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