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Update

Volume 21, Number 2 (October 2006)

Physician-Assisted Suicide: A Jewish Perspective

Dennis Prager

Adapted from a transcript of an oral presentation on January 4, 2006, for the Jack W. Provonsha Lecture Series on Physician-Assisted Suicide: A Religious Perspective

The subject of physician-assisted suicide is huge, and I am tempted to take the easy road by saying there is no ethical question. In the Jewish tradition, life is of infinite value, and unless you are taking the life of a murderer to prevent the death of another, killing is never acceptable. Furthermore taking one's own life is never acceptable. As I said before, human life is of infinite worth. I could simply leave it at that, end my discussion, and refer any further questions you may have to the Halakhists, the Jewish legal adjudicators, but I will not. I will try to provide you with a faint amount of insight into Jewish tradition and hopefully be thought provoking.

How important is life in the Jewish tradition? I learned this when I was in the first grade in Yeshiva. The Talmud, which is the greatest source of Jewish law after the Bible, asks the question "*lama niphra Adam yechid*," which translates as "why was Adam created singularly?" Why didn't God create a bunch of people to begin with? The answer given is twofold. The first lesson is that none can claim that his father or ancestor is more valuable than anyone else's if we all come from the same ancestor. The second lesson is that should someone have murdered Adam they would have killed the entire human race. That is the lesson to be gleaned from Genesis; if you take a human life it is equivalent to killing the whole of the human race.

That is a very powerful idea, and the fact that there are six billion people on the planet is coincidental to the impact of the loss of a single human life is. I think about this often as it was drilled into me as a child in my Jewish religious studies. It has become the basis for my pro-capital punishment stance. It strikes many as odd and counterintuitive that I support capital punishment for murder. Murder is so terrible that only through taking the murderer's life can we impress on society how terrible murder is.

Some say, "Are you crazy? How can you teach that killing is wrong by killing?" That is the usual response. However, William F. Buckley had a great counter response. He said, "Well, we teach that kidnapping is wrong by kidnapping. What do we do with the kidnapper? We kidnap them and take them to prison." But in any event, I have always been preoccupied with the knowledge of how terrible murder is and how much is lost.

Another teaching from the Jewish sources is when God says to Cain, after he kills his brother, "Where is your brother?" What is fascinating is that the literal translation from the Christian Bible is, "the blood of your brother is crying out to me." But in the Hebrew translation it reads, "the bloods of your brother are crying out to me."

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Interestingly, this phraseology is never used anywhere else. What is meant by bloods? Blood, in Hebrew, like English, does not have a plural. We do not have bloods. We do not say there was a lot of bloods on the floor after the accident. We do not say it in English nor do we say it in Hebrew. But it has a different meaning in the context of the Hebrew Bible according to the Talmud. The bloods of your brother are crying out to me has an explanation. When you murder someone, you have not only murdered that individual person but all of the offspring that would have come from that person. Consider the staggering toll of a murder, of taking an innocent life. One has taken a person’s life and the future lives that would have emanated from the person, and has, in effect, killed the whole world.

Another Talmudic phrase explains that whoever saves one life is considered to have saved the entire world. There is a reason for that thinking; Adam was the entire world. You and I are entire worlds. We are mini-universes; you and I are whole worlds unto ourselves.

When you or I are killed, an entire universe has died. It will never be replicated. What has happened to every one of us is fascinating and utterly unique, and the truth is that there really is no such thing as an average Joe. Every one of us is irreplaceable and we have to bear that in mind when taking a life. In the book *Jewish Bioethics* by two rabbis, J. David Bleich and Fred Rosner, the value of human life is infinite and beyond measure so that any part of life, even if only an hour or a second, is of precisely the same worth as 70 years of it, just as any fraction of infinity, being indivisible, remains infinite.

This is the most Orthodox approach, that to kill a decrepit patient approaching death constitutes exactly the same crime of murder as to kill a young, healthy person who may still have many decades to live. This runs against common sense, and I fully acknowledge that and will talk more about it later. It is important to understand that for the same reasons one life is worth as much as a thousand or a million lives, infinity is not increased by multiplying it. I was taught in Yeshiva that 1,000 lives are not 1,000 times more valuable than one life.

This teaching is why I have disagreed with the state of Israel. Israel is not necessarily (and frequently not) run according to Jewish law. It is a secular state with many religious people in it. It is a place where they have banned capital punishment, with one exception: Nazi war criminals. In all of Israel’s history, since 1948 when it was established, it has executed one murderer, Adolph Eichmann, the architect of the Holocaust. At the time I was 12 years old and not outraged by the act, but subsequently have come to be very angry.

Israel’s execution of Eichmann went very much against Jewish values. The message it sent was that if you kill millions you deserve to die, but if you kill only one, you don’t deserve to die. That is not the Jewish message. Now obviously from any human level, we have lost our common sense if we do not recoil more if 1,000 are killed, or 100 are killed by a terrorist in Baghdad, than if one is killed because 1,000 or 100 infinities have been destroyed. It is more angering, but on a moral plane you cannot say, “oh, it’s only one.” This explains the unconditional Jewish opposition to deliberate euthanasia, as well as to the surrender of one hostage in order to save the others if the whole group is otherwise threatened with death.

There is a television program, “24,” which I think is addictive. There was an episode that I was watching in which the main character, Jack Bauer (played by Kiefer Sutherland), is faced with a fascinating moral question. A woman terrorist has placed a gun on him, and he has the president of the United States connected on his cell phone. The female terrorist demands a presidential pardon for all of her prior crimes, plus a pardon for killing Jack Bauer (who she believes will kill her). The female terrorist knows the whereabouts of the arch-terrorist who has a bomb that will be detonated in Los Angeles. Jack Bauer pleads with the president to give her the pardon and allow her to kill him in order to save the many people that would be killed by the bomb.

I was watching this and saying, in front of my sons, “Mr. President, don’t do it. Don’t make the deal, don’t make the deal.” But it is an interesting question. Can you take the life of an innocent in advance for saving others? This is the most black and white of the positions. It is a standard Halakhic position. But it is very important to know the centrality of the sanctity of human life in Judaism, emanating from the Bible.

Perhaps it will be interesting to non-Jews to know just how life-centered Judaism is. You cannot understand Jews, both secular and religious, if you do not understand how life-oriented Judaism is. This belief emanates from the Torah, the five books of Moses. Interestingly enough, Judaism has always affirmed an afterlife, but the Torah is silent on the matter. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are silent about something that is pretty significant. Where do we go when we die? I have wrestled with this question a great deal. Why would the Torah be silent about an afterlife? Here, in a nutshell, are my conclusions on the Torah.

The Torah’s silence on the subject of the afterlife is overwhelmingly a reaction against Egypt. The Jews were to reject everything that Egypt stood for, and the first thing that ancient Egypt, its faith, its religion, and its outlook on life

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represented was a preoccupation with death. What are the pyramids? Most people forget this. The pyramids, where so much time was spent and so many lives expended building them and filling them with treasure, were built to be tombs.

The most important monument of ancient Egypt is a tomb. The Bible of Ancient Egypt was *The Book of the Dead*. Egypt was preoccupied with the afterlife and with death. Therefore, the Torah is silent because the generations that came from Egypt had to wean themselves utterly away from preoccupations with what happens after life in order to be preoccupied with what happens in this life.

This is new. By and large, religion tends to be preoccupied with what happens afterward. Even in Eastern religion, there is the concept of coming back into this life again and again until you finally attain enlightenment. And then there is nothing.

Judaism has always been preoccupied with this life. It is part of the reason that many Jews who are not religious are also preoccupied with ideologies that fix this world. One of the reasons for Jewish activism is that Jews, religious and even anti-religious Jews, are still preoccupied with what is called improving the world, repairing the world, perfecting the world—often utilizing means that are not grounded in Jewish teaching. Karl Marx was the

grandson of two Orthodox rabbis, and hated Judaism and Jews. But he was still heir to the notion of “Damn those Christians!” Speaking as a radically secularized Jew, he taught that Christians have gotten people to think about the next life so that they could live in poverty in this life and never revolt. We have to fix this world, and those of you who are not revolting against the bad conditions of this world, there is something wrong with you. You have been given religion, which is the opiate of the masses—or so Marx thought.

The opiate of the masses is the title that Marx and Lenin gave to religion. They hated religion because, in their view, it fostered passivity in the light of human evil. Of course this is nonsense. It was Christians, not Marxists, who abolished slavery. Christians were not retreating to monasteries to pray for the rest of their lives. They were involved tremendously in all sorts of work to improve the lot of their fellow human beings. But it did not matter to Marx. There was enough passivity in the face of evils in the world, injus-

tices, and inequalities to have him think that religion was an opiate. So to him, this world was all there was. Marx’s view of the world was a bastardization of the Jewish concept that this world is where our focus must be, creating the danger of only being focused on this world and allowing time on earth to ultimately end with a meaningless life. If there is really nothing after this life, then what is this? We are here for a snap of the fingers and then we disappear? Are we like a pebble that gets eroded and becomes sand? Is that all there is? Is that all we are? The ideas that came from Marx did not help the world.

There is a danger associated with preoccupation with the next world. Look at the Islamic terrorists. The motto of Hamas, which they say with great pride, is “we love death as much as the Jews love life.” They are absolutely right. I often believe that one has to take one’s enemies seriously in

their proclamations. They love death as much as the Jews, and arguably the Christians, love life, and therein lies the danger that life here and now does not matter, but what matters is afterward. To understand the Jewish view on the subject of physician-assisted suicide, one must understand the preoccupation with this life, and the preoccupation with the infinite value of life.

Preoccupation with this life and the afterlife go against one another. Once you are pre-

occupied with this life, and not only the transcendent source of value of life, then you start to ask questions like, what is the quality of your life? And as soon as the question of quality of life is offered, you get into the realm of when can we take it? Or when can I take my own? So that brings me to the question of when, in fact, life can be taken, if at all.

In Judaism, there are three times only when you are to die rather than violate a commandment. As you know, Judaism is a law-based religion. You are never to violate the commandments, especially the Sabbath, which has a particularly holy function. Since Loma Linda is a Seventh-day Adventist university, you can appreciate this even more if you are Seventh-day Adventist. In Jewish life, the Sabbath, which emanates from the Ten Commandments, has a unique status. One does not violate laws pertaining to the Sabbath except to save a life.

“In the Jewish tradition ... taking one’s own life is never acceptable ... I could simply leave it at that ...”

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According to the most Orthodox rabbinic sources, if you are so pious that you would not violate the Sabbath to save a life or at the least prolong it for one minute, then you are a murderer. It is a sin to keep the Sabbath if you are in any doubt about the person’s health, and about a life being endangered. That is why Orthodox doctors will work on the Sabbath as doctors but no other Jew is permitted to work on the Sabbath.

The three instances, in case you are curious regarding the specifics of where you would have to die rather than violate a Jewish law, are as follows: The first and most obvious and clear one is if I say to you, kill such and such, or I’ll kill you. You cannot kill such and such, thus you would have to die. Ideally, you would not kill me. I mean, at least, that is the Jewish view. If you get rid of me, you solve the whole problem, but you cannot kill the innocent to save your life. The second exception is sexual sin, usually understood as incest. Because it violates the centrality of what Judaism wants to make—a better world—and the price paid is so awful, according to Jewish law you would die rather than violate it. The third exception is public idol worship. So, if someone were to say to you, “I want you to go now to the Jewish community and announce that you now worship Baal the Canaanite god, and then bow down and lead others to do it as well or else I will kill you,” then you would have to allow yourself to be killed rather than do that. Those are the only three exceptions to violating Jewish law. Otherwise, you always preserve your own life and everyone else’s.

Let me tell you a story that deals directly with our question for discussion. This comes from the Talmud and is a true story. The Romans burned a number of rabbis alive and Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon was one of them. His pupils urged him to end his suffering quickly by opening his mouth and taking deep breaths of smoke and flames. But he replied, “It is better that He who gave me my soul should take it, rather than I should cause injury to myself.” Here is a very interesting story, and while we are discussing physician-assisted suicide, let us forget about the physician for the moment and think about self-assisted suicide. I tell you at the outset that if I were being burned alive, I would do everything possible to hasten my death. And I would help you to do everything possible to hasten your death. But if

you are an absolutist, then the pupils of Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon were wrong.

The rabbi should have done everything possible to keep himself burning. But there has got to be a voice in even the biggest absolutist that says, that’s ridiculous, that’s absurd. How is that a religious duty? On the other hand, one could say, did this rabbi not honor God by his response? And I think he did. Now remember, if the rabbi would have said, “Don’t you dare give advice to so and so who’s being burned alive,” I would think we had a real fool here. But if he himself is prepared to suffer more until he is naturally dead, as opposed to hastening his death because he thinks it dishonors the fact that God is the giver and taker of life, I cannot say that this man did not do something heroic. That is why I very often say on my radio show that I am not interested in making saints. I am interested in making people a little better. That to me would be a great achievement. Just make people a little kinder, a little more empathetic. What this rabbi did (although Judaism does not have a word for saint) was, nevertheless, saintly behavior.

This is the ultimate in piety. He is being consistent with the notion that there should never be suicide. Because if he had opened his mouth to receive the smoke, and thus hastened his own death, he would have been committing suicide. If you are an absolutist on this issue, he should have allowed himself to suffer as much as possible until the flames naturally killed him.

I want to challenge you, not for the sake of challenging, but because it is challenging. This subject is not as easy as even those of us who believe in the infinite preciousness of life, and who are opposed to the Oregon law or any similar law in California or elsewhere, we’ll know. Even if you are opposed to it you cannot deny the complexity of the question. And that is why I give you the story of the rabbi being burned alive as an example. Did he do right? Or did he do wrong? Would he have sinned if he hastened his own death? What if the scenario was set in the present tense and somebody could sneak him a gun while being burned? Would you say, “You know, rabbi, you just can’t do that. You are not only a religious person; you are a man of the cloth. You have to allow yourself to be burned to death.” It is very hard to imagine many people saying that, but again, strictly speaking that would, in fact, be the thing to recommend. That is why I want you to under-

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*“A rabbi once said
‘It is better that
He who gave me my
soul should
take it ...’”*

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stand how complex this subject is. That is why I did not simply say, “Life is infinitely precious, any questions?”

There is a competing value to the preciousness of life, and that competing value is the subject of part of this discussion. The competing value is the reduction of human suffering.

Suffering is a moral question, just as life is a moral question, to Judaism. And I dare say it is more so to Judaism than to Christianity. And though I am a religious Jew, I am not taking sides on this. I happen to believe both are right. But there is no doubt in my mind that there is a different Christian approach and a different Jewish approach to the question of suffering, and I will present these approaches in a light and in a serious way. And the serious way is that, for many Christians, suffering is often regarded as a form of imitation of Christ. It is a way of achieving a certain degree of closeness to God that is not available otherwise. It has a religious value to many Christians.

To Jews, suffering stinks. Period. End of issue. I told you there is a light way to tell this. This is my dream sociology study. Take fifty Jews, religious, secular, Orthodox, Conservative, Reformed, whatever, and take fifty Christians. I do not care if they're Catholic, Protestant, any variation on anything that affirms Jesus Christ will work. You take the fifty Jews and the fifty Christians and you bring them into a hotel under some false pretense. You serve them all lunch, and then you give them all equally unripe cantaloupe. I would bet you everything I have that you would have far more complaints from the Jews about the cantaloupe than from the Christians. There is no doubt. I tell this story to Jews and they totally agree. They crack up. There is no question. The Jews would exclaim, “What? Unripe cantaloupe for the Chosen People; that's impossible!” That's my joke about why Jews would complain more. But it is not because of the Chosen People notion.

Most Jews are very uncomfortable with the idea of the Chosen People. I happen to believe it; I'm religious. But that is not the reason. The reason goes back to this notion that, for Judaism, suffering is awful.

It goes back to the notion that suffering is an evil and it is on the same level with taking a life. Suffering is bad. It is not good. Now there could be good that comes out of suffering. Jews are not stupid. Obviously there are lessons to be learned because Jews suffer like anybody else. Forget anti-Semitism; just in daily life everybody suffers. So I wrote a book called *Happiness Is a Serious Problem*. If it were not a serious problem, I would not have written the book.

So obviously, everybody knows there is something to be learned from suffering, but the deepest Jewish belief is that you get rid of it. It is not good to have. I will give you one

more anecdote. I was invited to Washington, D.C., a number of years ago to speak for a group called the Young Presidents Organization. It is a group of company presidents under the age of, I think, 40 or 45 or 50. It was a distinguished panel at a beautiful location in Washington, D.C. They had a distinguished Catholic priest, a distinguished Protestant minister, and I was the Jew. We were not told what we would be asked. They wanted utterly spontaneous answers, and they began with, “All right, gentlemen, what is your view of the purpose of life? Why did God create people? You each have three minutes.”

Thank God I went last. I remember being dazzled by the eloquence of the Catholic priest and the Protestant minister. They spoke beautifully about the sanctity of life, the glorifying of God involved in being alive. They were beautiful responses. And I knew what I was going to say and kept thinking to myself, “I'm telling you, they're gonna regret inviting me. They'll think that I am some peasant compared to these eloquent theologians.” When it was finally my turn I said, “Forgive me after hearing these two beautiful statements about glorifying God, you are going to wonder why you invited me. But I have to be honest with you. This is what I think. I think God created us humans to enjoy life.” Nobody in the audience smiled or laughed. “And, you know, I'm really enjoying myself, but nobody else is. But that's what I believe. I believe that. I actually believe God so loves us He wants us to enjoy life.”

I gave them proof that God loves us and wants us to enjoy ourselves. For example, why did God make all the fruit trees? God could have made one plant that has all the nutrients we need to live, so why create apples and pineapples and bananas and peaches? Every time I see a fruit tree, I think, wow, what a gift! Thank you God for giving us a dessert tree. That's what most fruit are. They're nature's desserts. Now why do they exist? There's no other purpose to a peach than to simply derive pleasure from it. It's not particularly nutritious. It's just fun to eat, end of issue.

I know I will be skating on thin ice, but I like to talk real. This is in the sexual realm. Why does a woman have a clitoris? It plays no role whatsoever in reproduction. It has one purpose, joy. That is why joyless groups remove it. That is what a clitoridectomy is about. The thought process is, “Hey you don't need one to procreate and we don't want you to have much fun.” Anti-joy religious groups are very scary. I like people who enjoy life. So do you. Even if you don't enjoy life, you would much rather be with people who do, and I think that is why God created us.

Now I did not say that God created us to have fun. I said that God created us to enjoy life. The purpose of life is not

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to play video games, or to live a Hugh Hefnerian life, nor to be a hedonist. The purpose is to enjoy life. I will give a Talmudic basis for this assertion. The rabbis say that there are questions that Jews must answer after they die and have to appear before the heavenly Host or Judge. Did you set aside a specific time every day to study the Torah? Did you try to make a family? Did you deal honestly in business? And then there is the question that is my personal favorite: Did you enjoy every legitimate pleasure on earth?

If you did not enjoy every legitimate pleasure on earth, then you have to account for it before the God Almighty. Imagine what God would say, “I put all these pleasures on earth and you denied yourself?”

The Bible and the Torah tell of a Nazarite, one who takes a vow to abstain from wine and sex and from cutting his hair. After the period of being a Nazarite, of being an ascetic, he has to bring a sin offering because it is a sin not to engage in the permitted pleasures of this world in Judaism. So to be an ascetic or to be anhedonic—to deny yourself pleasure—is a major biblical sin. There is quite a broad basis for the belief that suffering is bad, that suffering should be removed in Judaism, and therefore a lot of people see competing goods here—even religious people.

The paramount notion of preserving life in Judaism is to reduce gratuitous human suffering. Suffering is not noble. It is awful. Perhaps the most joyful life-loving person I ever met was diagnosed with colon cancer and, for whatever reason, the doctors did not reduce his pain sufficiently or could not reduce it sufficiently. He could not take it anymore and knew he was going to die anyway. So finally he jumped out of a window.

So what is the purpose of life? “What does it ennoble exactly?” was the question my friend asked. I do not know that human life is ennobled by having someone in a certain physical state. But please understand that I am not for euthanasia.

I am against all laws that allow physician-assisted suicide, but laws and morality are not the same thing. I do not believe that keeping alive a brain-dead person ennobles God, glorifies God, or ennobles life. If you say this, then, in essence, what you are saying is that life is a purely biological statement. It has no content. I do not find that ennobling. But I can see the argument. Who are we to judge?

That is why I want you to know that, at least in my opinion, the question is far more complex than is often granted by either side. I’ll give you another example of suffering as a moral issue. I will give advance warning that some of you may find this disturbing, but I would be dishonest if I didn’t raise the issue.

I object—as much as I believe, that the vast majority of abortions in our country are immoral—I object to the equation of abortions in America with the Holocaust, which is often made by opponents of abortion. But I do not object because I am Jewish; that has nothing to do with it. I object because it is not morally equivalent in my view, and the only reason is because of the suffering.

Watching your children being walked into a gas chamber, or being with them when it happens, or watching your own child thrown alive into fires as the Nazis did when the gas chambers were too full, cannot be compared to the taking of a life of a human fetus or unborn child. Even if you hold that there is an equivalency with regard to the act of homicide, there is not an equivalency with regard to the suffering. That is a moral issue.

It is a moral issue when a conscious adult knows what is happening and sees their child burned alive. And that is what six million saw. The number six million is not what is important, rather it is the suffering that is key. Suffering is a morally qualitative issue.

Just recently the miners trapped in the Sago Coal Mine in West Virginia made news. Do you know what most of the articles were about? The issue that loomed largest was the horror the families experienced being misled into thinking their loved one was alive. But there was another fascinating sub-context to this tragedy, and that is that many of the miners left notes behind to loved ones. They knew they were dying because with carbon monoxide one gets woozy, falls asleep, and eventually dies. I knew a man once who committed suicide by closing his garage door, turning on his engine, and letting the carbon monoxide put him to sleep. Do you know what the loved ones say in cases of carbon monoxide? Thank God, we know he didn’t suffer.

What is the first question that parents ask if their child is killed in an accident or serving the country in a war? Did he suffer? Those are real questions. They are moral issues. And that is what prompts anyone to think about physician-assisted suicide, the immorality of gratuitous suffering, because that is what is involved so often.

Now we are presented with another issue, and it is one of my favorites. It is called standards versus compassion. The standards crowd is usually comprised of the conservatives in America and the compassion crowd is usually comprised of the liberals. Does this mean that no conservative has compassion and no liberal has standards? No. But, generally speaking, physicians, not the people I am talking about, have to maintain the standards, whatever the price. The liberal position is that compassion for the individuals overrules the standard for the many. That is how it usually works, and that

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is what we have here.

This brings me to the final chapter of my talk: what to do about physician-assisted suicide. I side with the standards crowd. But I side with the standards crowd in the micro realm. I have to explain this because this generally annoys only two groups: conservatives and liberals. Everyone else tends to be very happy with the notion. I’ll give you the toughest and, therefore, best example of all issues: homosexuality.

If you know a homosexual, the person may be a jerk, just as there are heterosexual jerks. But the homosexual jerk was created in God’s image like anybody else. Most true homosexuals, especially male ones, do not choose to be sexually attracted to men and not women. There is no true straight man that would stop being attracted to attractive women. It is unimaginable to straight men that another man could look at a picture of a beautiful woman in a bikini the same way as they would look at a picture of a truck. As I did not choose to be attracted to women, a gay man did not choose to be attracted to another man and not a woman. Now if they are attracted to both, then that is a completely separate story. But in any event, my point in all of this is to tell you I really do have compassion for gays. Otherwise, I would not have begun with what I just said.

But at the same time, I have a standard that I do want to uphold, and that is the heterosexual ideal that a man and a woman unite. My ideal is that they form a family. That is why I am against same sex marriage, because the legalization of same sex marriages is a society announcing there is no difference between a heterosexual and a homosexual union.

The liberal position says: Want to base a family on having no mother or no father? Go right ahead. We couldn’t care less. We are neutral. Compassion overwhelms the standard. The conservative position is that the standard has to be maintained, no matter how much compassion we have for two wonderful gays.

My position is, and I will apply it to physician-assisted suicide, that you maintain your standards on social laws, on the societal level, but compassion trumps standards on the one-to-one level. Thus, I will be loving and accepting of the gays in my life. I will love them. I will accept them. I will have them over to my house. I will dine at their house.

They are fellow beings. At the same time I do not want to see marriage redefined on a social level.

Now to discuss physician-assisted suicide. I am unalterably opposed to legalizing physician-assisted suicide. Society cannot make a statement that it is O.K. for physicians to kill people. Period. It cannot make that statement. Does that mean that in every instance it is immoral? Let us go back to the story of the rabbi who was burned alive. If a physician were there and could inject him with something to end his suffering and kill him, would you think that the physician committed murder? Whether it was a rabbi or a priest or an average Joe begging to be killed, of course you would not accuse the physician of murder. So we have to keep it illegal, and yet it does not mean that it can never happen. That is my position.

Standards must be maintained or you end up with the situation we have in Holland where increasingly people who do not voluntarily ask for it are in fact being euthanized because the doctors and the family have just decided that good old grandpa is really over the hill. Grandpa may or may not be over the hill and may not have decided to terminate his life.

Whatever safeguards you put up, they are going to be violated. Rabbi Dale Friedman, a chaplain at the Philadelphia Geriatric

Center, which serves about one thousand elderly Jews, has written a paper in which she explains that she understands “the longing for a way out for people who are suffering.” She goes on, “I just happen to think this is the wrong way. There are an infinite amount of things we can do to make the experience of dying better, without putting in another human being’s hands the authority and the power to kill somebody.”

The difficulty lies in defining terminal illness. How do you define it? Is a person terminal if they die in a year’s time, six months, tomorrow? How do you define it? How do you know when the doctor says “terminal” that they will not in fact live? You do not, and there are a lot of people walking around today who were told that they had a terminal illness, and it turned out that it was not so terminal—or at least they are still terminal five years later. The difficulty is in defining terminal illness and the risk that a dying patient’s request for assistance in ending his or her life might not be truly voluntary.

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“Society cannot make a statement that it is O.K. for physicians to kill people. Period.”

“Physician-Assisted Suicide” continued...

People say voluntary. How do you know what the pressure to make that decision feels like? Not to mention the pressure placed on the ailing by the family. A person may feel like he or she is a burden on their family and the sense of duty to just get rid of oneself justifies the prohibitions on assisted suicide that we uphold. Chief Justice Rehnquist argued this point.

An article from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency explains that a doctor’s first priority, and most Jewish physicians and medical ethicists stress this point, is to save a patient’s life. Yet at the same time, the conflict is that Judaism is extremely sympathetic to the easing of pain and suffering. David Zweibel, who is Orthodox and the general counsel and director of government affairs for the Agudath Israel of America (that’s what we call ultra-Orthodox) said, “We as a Jewish community ought to have some special sensitivities about this in view of the euthanasia movement in Nazi Germany because that’s where they began before the Holocaust in their horribly, horribly dismissive statement, ‘life unworthy of life.’”

That is where I stand, at this moment, but open to changing my mind. I am against all legalization of it. But I am not against it in every instance. How do we square the circle? It

is very difficult. It is not fully possible. There are too many examples where even a religiously infused human being would have to say, “What are we serving by not answering this person’s cry?” And after all, if physician-assisted suicide is wrong, then suicide is wrong.

So a physician cannot do it, but we understand the decision of the person I knew to jump out of a window. What if he was a quadriplegic and could not get to the window sill, and was wracked with pain but could not move his body to get a bottle of pills to end it? We who are religious must be the fighters for standards, or we will end up like Europe, and not the best of Europe obviously. At the same time, we cannot lose our hearts. God gave us compassion. It needs to be used. He uses it. We should too. But first and foremost, life is precious.



Dennis Prager, is a 23-year veteran in talk radio. Mr. Prager has a pulse on ethical issues and has been referred to as a “moral compass” and someone whose mission has been “to get people obsessed with what is right and wrong.” Mr. Prager has penned several books. The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism remains a best seller in paperback.

Jack W. Provonsha posthumously honored with Centennial Vanguard Award



Other recipients of the Vanguard Award for Mission of Wholeness presented Sunday, April 9, 2006, at the Centennial Gala held in Opsahl Gymnasium at Loma Linda University’s Drayson Center. Picture courtesy of the April 20, 2006, edition of TODAY.

On April 9, 2006, Loma Linda University celebrated 100 years of service. During the celebration, those people whose lives, contributions, unique talents, and perspectives have been the “vanguard of our future” were bestowed the Centennial Vanguard Award.

The Centennial Vanguard Award recognized researchers, clinicians, innovators, educators, administrators, and leaders “whose lives of service helped frame the vision for tomorrow’s tasks” and whose work may provide the greatest advancement in fulfilling the vision to “transform lives.”

Jack W. Provonsha was given the Vanguard Award for Mission of Wholeness posthumously. Dr. Provonsha embodied the phrase “to make man whole.” His daughter, Linda Provonsha Sorter, was informed of her father’s award and graciously gave the award to the Center for Christian Bioethics to display and inspire future generations. The Center plans to build a cabinet in the Thompson Ethics Library for the display of this award, as well as a bronzed bust of Albert Schweitzer created by Dr. Provonsha and restored by Victor Issa.

Student updates



BRIAN BROCK, DPHIL, MS

After successfully completing his master's in biomedical and clinical ethics at LLU, Brian Brock went on to finish no less than three additional graduate degrees: a diploma in theology from Oxford and a master's and doctor of philosophy from Kings College, London. He now holds the position of lecturer in moral and practical theology at the University of Aberdeen's School of Divinity and Religious Studies.

Of his master's in biomedical and clinical ethics, Brian writes, "it gave me hands-on experience at doing theology in the context of modern medical practice." In his position as lecturer he says, "My main interests lie in moral and practical theology, which means I find theology most interesting when it is done in relation to the concrete question of daily life. This interest developed because I came to theology through the sciences."

It isn't atypical that a student's interest in theology is prompted by academic and practical work in the sciences. Brian's obvious success at blending health care science and theological concern for ethics is yet another story to celebrate in the history of the Center and its intimate relation with the Faculty of Religion.



DUANE COVRIG, PHD, MA

Duane finished his PhD while teaching part time for the Faculty of Religion at Loma Linda University. He successfully completed his PhD in education at the University of California, writing a dissertation on the organizational history of Loma Linda University. Soon after receiving his doctorate, Duane was awarded a tenure track position at the University of Akron, in Ohio. He taught educational leadership there from 1998 until 2005, when he joined Andrews University's School of Education as professor in the leadership and educational administration department.

Duane's list of publications is impressive. It includes articles published in journals such as the *Journal of Leadership Studies*, *Professional Ethics*, *Research on Christian Higher Education*, and the *Adventist Review*. In 2004, he was given the Paula Silver award for the best case in the *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*.

When he is not busy with work, he enjoys family life with his wife and two daughters. We are proud to count Duane among our alumni here at the Faculty of Religion's MA in biomedical and clinical ethics.

ASSOCIATE SCHOLARS of the Center for Christian Bioethics

For some time now, the Center has felt a need to expand the circle of conversation on issues of ethics in health care. As a result, the Center has developed an interdisciplinary group of scholars on the Loma Linda University campus—the associate scholars of the Center for Christian Bioethics. These associate scholars will gather quarterly to discuss ways in which the Center can engage the various disciplines represented on campus. The Center believes that working together will enhance the attention to and focus on issues of ethics throughout the broad sweep of the University.



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Editorial

In what may be seen as a bit of a departure from traditional articles in the pages of *UPDATE*, we print a piece in this issue from Dennis Prager. Mr. Prager is a radio talk show host, and while he has a number of advanced academic degrees and an honorary doctorate, he is quick to note that he is not an “academic” per se. He is, without question, a keen and insightful voice in our society on matters of ethics and morality. Day by day, he thinks aloud with his audience of millions here in Southern California and around the country via syndication. He is not at all shy about his identity as a Jew, and in this article, adapted from a lecture he offered during the 2006 Provonsha Lecture Series, he shares a Jewish perspective on the issue of physician-assisted suicide. One of our explicit goals here at the Center for Christian Bioethics is to help educate our community in matters of bioethics. The 2006 Provonsha Lecture Series certainly accomplished this goal. We look forward to our series in 2008 and trust we’ll enjoy support in building another fine lineup of speakers on the topic of the moral status of the embryo.



Mark Carr, PhD
Director, Center for Christian Bioethics
Loma Linda University

Winter quarter 2007 schedule

Health & Faith Forum

BIOETHICS AND WHOLENESS GRAND ROUNDS

Exploring issues in ethics and wholeness across the disciplines

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 10, 2007

William B. Hurlbut, MD

Stanford University Medical Center Neuroscience Institute

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 24, 2007

Sponsored by the Center for Spiritual Life & Wholeness

Barbara Hernandez, PhD, RN, AAMFT

Director, Loma Linda University

Marital and Family Therapy Clinic

Associate professor, counseling and family sciences

Loma Linda University

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2007

Andrew Klein, MD

Director, Comprehensive Transplant Center

Cedars-Sinai Heart Center

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2007

Sponsored by Richard Rice, PhD

Religion and the Sciences

Speaker: TBA

Update
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Whitny Braun, presenter at the October 11, 2006, Health and Faith Forum titled “*Sacred Suicide: Rules, Rituals, and Rationale of Sallekhana in the Jain Communities of Northern India*”

Going Electronic with *UPDATE*

Loma Linda University Center for Christian Bioethics *UPDATE* newsletter currently enjoys a readership of 5,000 and a mailing list of more than 3,500. In an effort to reduce the costs associated with publication of the newsletter, we would like to begin offering delivery of *UPDATE* electronically.

We would greatly appreciate a moment of your time to let us know which format of *UPDATE* you would prefer receiving by filling out the form below. Thank you for taking the time to let us know how we may better accommodate our readership in the future.

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