

Religious attitudes to the elderly and death

What is Death?

40 years ago a person was pronounced dead when their heart stopped beating, due to technology doctors can now keep a person's heart beating artificially, therefore death now seems to be when a person is declared 'brain dead', this when there is no eye movement and the pupils do not react to light. A brain dead person can be kept 'alive' using life support but it is at this point that family can decide to turn off the machine and organs can be taken for transplants (with the families consent).

Religious definition of death: The soul leaves the body to begin an afterlife, this could be heaven or hell or rebirth into another person or living thing.

Sanctity of Life	Value of Life	Quality of Life
Life is God given, this makes it sacred and holy	The value of a person's life over and above physical value (think about the cost to keep someone alive and link to Sanctity of life)	A measure of fulfilment (how happy a person is, are they pain free, living with dignity and able to experience God?)

Is Death the End or a New Beginning?

Christianity	Buddhism
<p>Judgment day: God decides whether people should spend eternity in heaven or hell based on their actions in life.</p> <p>Heaven: Being with God, this can be taken literally, often with images of angels, paradise and pearly gates or symbolically meaning that a person feels close to God.</p> <p>Hell: Being separated from God. This can be seen literally with imagery of the devil, fire and torture or symbolically as a feeling of loneliness and separation from God.</p> <p>Purgatory: Roman Catholics believe in a place of purification before heaven.</p>	<p>Rebirth: Continuing life in another form.</p> <p>Samsara: cycle of life death and rebirth.</p> <p>Karma: Rebirth depends on the actions of a person in their previous life.</p> <p>Buddhists do not believe in a soul, they believe that at the time of rebirth, the impermanent life force is reborn at a different level of life (based on their karma).</p>

Problems faced by the Elderly

Ageism: Prejudice and discrimination against the elderly.

Poverty: Many rely on a state pension and benefits.

Retirement (giving up work): Many do not feel ready to retire and prefer to keep their body and minds active. Others see retirement as an opportunity to relax and do something different.

Illness: Often illness is more serious and can take the elderly longer to recover.

More dependent on others and may feel like a **burden** on their families.

Feel worthless to society if they do not work.

Loneliness: If a partner has died or families moved away.



Who should care for the Elderly?

Living at Home

Many elderly people are very independent and want to stay in their own homes but with a little support. Local social services may give an elderly person a social worker to arrange help with cleaning, and meals on wheels for a small cost.

If family live nearby they may visit regularly and help out too. However if they have moved away they may rely on phone calls and visits on special occasions.



Community Options

Sheltered Housing: Elderly people rent a small flat within a complex with communal areas for socialising. These are adapted to make life easier and they often have a warden on duty to help and take charge if there's an emergency. This means elderly people have some independence and privacy and still have a place to call their own.

Residential Homes: These provide security and care when people can no longer look after themselves. Residents have their own room but use a communal lounge and dining room. Meals are provided and often activities are arranged so that people can socialise if they want to.

Hospitals: If an elderly person is unwell they may stay in hospital for a short time so they have access to the medical care they need. If they have a terminal illness and are close to death they may stay in a hospice (a home that provides care until a person dies).



Living with family

Many families prefer having elderly family members living with them. This is a feature of extended families and is often favoured by Muslim families ("*Lost his right to enter paradise because he did not look after them*").

This is an ideal situation as the family member is treated like an important member of the family, not as someone who lives there because there is no other option.

Some religions encourage this because it shows gratitude and respect as well as recognising that the elderly person has a lot of wisdom, in Christianity one of the Ten Commandments is "*Honour your father and Mother*", this would support a family looking after an elderly loved one.

Some situations mean that elderly family members cannot live with family and therefore alternatives are needed.



What does Religion Teach about the Elderly?

Christianity: The elderly should be supported because they may be vulnerable and must be respected, "*Honour your father and mother*". Christians prefer to allow the elderly to keep their independence, when this is not possible the best option for each person must be found "*Love your neighbour*". Churches often provide support including regular **Holy Communion** at home or in residential care homes.

Buddhism: The elderly must be **respected** for their **experience and wisdom**. Some Buddhist organisations provide support for all needs including **spiritual needs**. It is the responsibility of the elderly persons **children** to **look after** them and should be seen as a **privilege** because of the care they were given as a child. Buddhists believe in '**Anicca**' which means **nothing lasts forever**, the elderly are a reminder of this. Looking after a persons parents also leads to **good Karma**.

Should we take a life?

Generally speaking there is never a reason to take a life, however if this were the case there would be no war, discussion on executing criminals or murder. Those who support war believe it has to be done to protect your country, even if it does mean that lives are ended. What does this say about the value of life, are there some circumstances where taking life is ok, in these circumstances is life less valuable?

Religious Views

In the 10 Commandments it says 'Thou shall not commit murder', Leviticus takes this further by saying 'if anyone takes the life of a human being he must be put to death'. This brings up legal killing (execution) and illegal killing (murder). Buddhists prefer not to take part in any killing, legal or illegal as it would go against the 1st precept of not harming any living thing..

Who decides whether a life can be taken?

Government: In cases of executions and war the government decide, some feel that no government should be allowed to make that sort of decision.

Is ending a persons life and allowing a person to die the same thing? Doctors face the second option on a regular basis, this is made more difficult if a patient is very cler that they would prefer to die.

All of the main religions (except Buddhism) believe that only God can decide when a person dies. This means if a person takes their own life or allows their life to be taken, they are sinning and risk an afterlife without God or a bad rebirth due to bad Karma.

Euthanasia

"Good Death" or a painless death, by agreement and done with **compassion to end suffering.**

Voluntary: A person asks a doctor to end their life.

Non-Voluntary: A person is too ill to ask but it is in their best interest.

Involuntary: This happened in Nazi Germany where sick and disabled people were killed without being asked.

If euthanasia happens it can be Passive or Active.

Passive: A pain killer (such as morphine) is given and increased to help with pain but also shortens life. This may also be where life saving medication/treatment is stopped.

Active: Giving a drug that will deliberately end life.

Religious Views

Christianity: Against euthanasia because they believe in **The Sanctity of Life.** Some believe a loving God would not want people to suffer and because they have **freewill** they can decide when to end their life if the quality of it is reduced.

Buddhism: Euthanasia is wrong and causes bad Karma, it also breaks the first precept (not to cause harm to any living thing). Suffering is a fact of life that must be accepted but it could be argued that if the 'right intention' was to show love and mercy, it could be acceptable.

How long should we keep people alive?

Life support machines: keeps a person alive by supporting breathing, and giving essential food and fluids, without it some may die.

Medication: these may control serious conditions like diabetes and epilepsy.

Hi-tech equipment: often used in hospitals for serious health issues or emergencies.

All religions believe in **maintaining life because of; compassion, quality of life, value of life and not causing harm and using God given talents and intelligence.** Many agree with turning off life support if a person has no quality of life. **Does this make life less valuable?**

Can Religion help the dying and bereaved (family of dying relatives)?

Christians believe that the afterlife brings heaven and eternal life with God, this can comfort those who are dying and their families. In this way death is a new beginning and a reward. Some ask for forgiveness on their death bed, hoping to get to heaven but some feel that these kind of apologies are not sincere.

Buddhists are comforted by the idea of rebirth, but a good rebirth can only happen if a person has gained good karma in their life.

Religious people are keen to support the bereaved and offer support before during and after a funeral. The bereaved are mourning (A period of sadness after a loved one dies) for the person they love and this can be very hard.

The Hospice Movement

The strongest argument against euthanasia. Hospices help people to die with dignity.

- Care and support for patients, relatives and friends at the most difficult stage in their lives.
- Relieve pain - whether caused by the illness or by the stress and fear it creates. Hospices specialise in pain control and lead the way in palliative medicine (pain control by drugs). They say all pain, no matter how severe, can be brought under control.
- Enable patients, families and friends to face up to death by allowing them to talk a free and open way. This is one of the main facilities offered by Hospices.
- Care for the emotional needs of relatives - before, during and after the patient's death. In most hospitals, the needs relatives are largely ignored. Hospices seek to fulfil those needs.

Past Exam Questions

Knowledge and Understanding Questions

Explain briefly what is meant by passive euthanasia. [2 marks]

Explain one religious belief about life after death. [3 marks]

Explain religious attitudes to the way the elderly should be treated. Refer to religious beliefs and teachings. [4 marks]

Explain the difference between hospitals and hospices. [3 marks]

Explain why some religious people do not agree with using care homes for the elderly. [4 marks]

Explain briefly what is meant by Quality of life. [2 marks]

Explain briefly what is meant by death. [2 marks]

Explain religious attitudes to euthanasia. Refer to religious beliefs and teachings. [5 marks]

Give 2 problems faced by the elderly. [2 marks]

What is retirement? [1 mark]

Explain why religious believers agree with the use of hospices for the dying. [3 marks]

Explain religious beliefs and teachings about death **and** what happens after death. [5 marks]

Evaluation Questions

3 marks-'What do you think?' Explain your opinion

'Only God should decide when a person dies'

'believing in life after death gives great comfort to the elderly'

'Religion provides comfort for people who mourn'

'Religious believers should always respect the elderly'

6 marks- 'Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer showing you have thought about more than one point of view. Refer to religious arguments in your answer'

'Life support machines should never be used'

'Terminally ill people should be able to choose when to die'

'Families should always take care of elderly relatives'

'Life is too valuable to allow a life support machine to be switched off'