

Respect for life has become taboo in Belgium



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While the debate on euthanasia had been relatively quiet in Belgium in the last period, it seems to be coming to the fore once again following a number of specific cases that have made the news.

For instance, there was a man – not yet very old – who was terminally ill and who opted for euthanasia. The week before the event, he organised a grand farewell party for all his friends, which of course was widely reported in the press with photos and interviews. He stated explicitly that any negative feelings his friends might have regarding his decision left him completely cold and that this was their business. Then there was a medical doctor who stated that people spend more on medical costs in the last three years of life than in all the preceding years, something one would never do with an old car. A bizarre statement, naturally with a hidden agenda. Not so long before, even the chairman of a health insurance fund – and a fund with Christian roots, at that – had suggested that it might be advisable to promote the option of euthanasia to the elderly in order to better control the rising costs of health insurance. Here, the link between euthanasia and financial considerations was laid bare without any hesitation whatsoever, and there was no need for a hidden agenda. Reference is invariably made to the coalition agreement drawn up when the Government was recently formed which states that, on a sound scientific basis, efforts must be made to extend advance directives for euthanasia to people who lack

capacity due to dementia, and that the conditions under which this is feasible must be investigated.

When we listen to what the well-known advocates of euthanasia and its extension put forward, it is striking that, under the banner of a pluralistic society, only one view of humanity is put forward, namely that of a person who can exercise their free will in an absolute manner, which must guarantee them absolute self-determination. Any other view of humanity, in which, for example, the social dimension and mutual responsibility towards one another are explicitly regarded as an inherent dimension of the human condition, is dismissed as an outdated view of humanity. Everything seems reduced to a wholly individualistic view of humanity in which the “every man for himself” principle prevails. The only consideration now is how, in complex situations of incapacity – which are already being interpreted more broadly than just in cases of dementia – both the person’s free will and the professional diligence of the person who must carry out the euthanasia can be guaranteed.

The notion that life as such, regardless of its form, can have an absolute value, and that human beings are always social beings – meaning that decisions concerning life have repercussions for the bereaved – is dismissed as entirely secondary and irrelevant in the ongoing debate that is intended to lead to a possible extension of the law. Both the individuals concerned, their immediate circle and, not least, the care providers are placed here before a moral dilemma in which they must, a priori, conform to a view of humanity that is imposed upon them. Under the banner of absolute freedom, freedom itself is actually being undermined, and the debate is conducted solely within a predetermined ethical framework based on a view of humanity that is no longer open to discussion or opposition.

When, in certain countries where the euthanasia debate is, so to speak, still in its infancy, and where serious moral questions are being raised precisely regarding this absolute sanctity of life and the social responsibility that every person bears towards others, and where the question is therefore raised as to whether euthanasia as such can really be regarded as an achievement of a growing understanding of evolving humanity, this is, for our country, a discussion long forgotten and shelved, in which one looks down with pity upon those who have not yet attained this moral maturity. The argument is then very quickly raised that certain doctrinal views must be completely excluded from a society that has freed itself from any form of religious or philosophical consideration that does not align with the new view of humanity that has just been put forward.

And so it is that those who still attempt to link a moral consideration to the debate, and quite rightly try to present this as the starting point, are very quickly silenced, accused of inhuman cruelty because they are said to be insensitive to the suffering that others must endure. For that would be a view of humanity that deprives people of the right to make independent decisions about their own lives and allows an ideology to take precedence over the concrete situation in which a person finds themselves.

According to them, “humanity” demands that one employ every means to alleviate suffering and, if this is impossible, to eliminate it entirely. The true meaning of compassion is reduced and perverted to the radical elimination of suffering by actively killing the other person, rather than honouring the word in its true sense, whereby loving care for one’s fellow human beings remains the priority. Euthanasia is elevated to the supreme form of compassion, as a loving act by which a person is delivered from their suffering.

Those who, on the other hand, still dare to speak of the absolute sanctity of all life – especially when it appears that this is being put forward from a particular religious perspective and with religious overtones – seem to come from another planet. They become the pariahs in a country that has presented itself globally as a pioneer in the ethical debate, where the sole aim is now to promote both abortion and euthanasia as fundamental human rights.

The fact that this has already been achieved in France in the area of abortion may well be regarded by some Belgians as a failure to remain at the forefront of freeing oneself from any form of moral interference in decision-making concerning life and death, based on an absolute triumph of self-determination that no one or nothing can touch. In this way, absolute respect for life has become buried and ultimately taboo. The real question is not whether we have become more free, but whether we have become more humane.