Letters

Is medical ethics lost?
Response 1

SIR
Professor R M Hare's guest editorial (1) seeks to use Christian theology to justify Dr Cox killing his patient. I am writing on behalf of the 4,000 plus British doctors who are Christians and members of the Christian Medical Fellowship to draw attention to his highly selective and unbalanced use of Scripture.

The only text he quotes is the so-called 'Golden Rule' which in a modern translation reads: 'So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets' (2). Professor Hare moves from this to imply that love (usually 'compassion' in the euthanasia debate) justifies situational ethics, and suggests that 'the Golden Rule can ... be made the basis for sound reasoning about this and other moral questions about our treatment of other people'.

Even within the constraints of a short editorial, this will not do. It has been said that 'a text out of context is just a pretext' and while love is of course a central Christian concept, a Christian assessment of the euthanasia debate needs to look at other Bible texts too. 'You shall not murder' (3) prohibits the intentional killing of the innocent (4). The situationist argues that one may intentionally kill in certain situations and yet be acting 'in love', but this clearly contravenes Christ's own teaching that obeying the greater commandments of the Law does not excuse disobeying the lesser (5, 6). In the mind of Christ these conflicts of duty simply do not occur, and Christians today have therefore to try to hold such apparent conflicts in tension.

There are two instances of voluntary euthanasia in the Bible. No judgement is expressed of the action of Abimelech's armour-bearer who ran through his wounded master to spare him the 'indignity' of being killed by a woman (7), but David (8) ordered the execution of the Amalekite who claimed that he had killed Saul at his request when he was dying in great pain. This claim differs from the other account of Saul's death (9) but whether it is true or not, the compassionate killing of Saul constituted a capital offence in the mind of David.

These few references confirm at the very least that the Bible has other things to say about the ethics of euthanasia and members of this fellowship would not want readers of the Journal of Medical Ethics to think that Professor Hare was presenting a Christian case.

References
(2) Matthew 7: 12.
(8) 2 Samuel 1: 1–16.
(9) 1 Samuel 31: 1–6.

ANDREW FERGUSSON
General Secretary
Christian Medical Fellowship,
157 Waterloo Road,
London SE1 8XN

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Response 2

SIR
We all prefer a small number of workable rules to pages of petty legalising. It is therefore not surprising that the ethical teaching of the world’s major religions is summarised accordingly: the ten commandments of the Judaic Christian tradition, the eightfold path of Buddhism, the five pillars of Islam.

Contemporary ethicists have understandably followed suit. The four principles advocated by Gillon (1) – beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy and justice – are one such example.

Professor Hare, in his recent guest editorial (2), attempts the ultimate in brevity by recourse to Jesus Christ’s Golden Rule: ‘So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the law and the prophets’ (3). He then applies this to the case of Dr Cox, the English rheumatologist who was recently convicted for killing a patient with an injection of potassium chloride. If in similar circumstances we would wish active euthanasia ourselves, he asks, then should we not do the same for our patients?

This extraordinary view not only disregards established medical facts (since had Dr Cox been willing to consult, he could have relieved his patient’s pain without killing her (4)), but it distorts Christian teaching. Jesus’s statement must be considered in its proper context, not interpreted in isolation.

The central thrust of Christ’s ethical teaching was to imitate God’s character (5) and to obey God’s commands (6), in other words, to treat others in the way that God himself