Future Challenges Facing the Life and Dying Debate

By Mehmet Ozalp
Introduction

- The general issue of death and dying and associated palliative care aims to alleviate pain associated with death at the two core levels.
  - Physical pain and suffering
  - Emotional and spiritual pain and suffering
- Up until now it appears that while religious services mainly focus on the soothing of emotional and spiritual suffering as well as ending physical pain, secular institutions focus on the minimisation and ending of physical pain and suffering as well as emotional pain.
- There is a need for greater collaboration and a holistic approach to palliative care combining both approaches.
Religious challenges

- Palliative care and approach to death and dying from the religious perspective:
  - Death is not the end but a transition to another in most cases better existence.
  - The dying person should be prepared not just death but also for an afterlife.
  - In some traditions physical pain is seen spiritually elevating or redeeming.
  - Therefore, euthanasiasia is harmful morally and spiritually.
Religious challenges

- Death is deeply personal.
- Amongst others, there are two timeless needs and concerns within human nature related to death and dying.
  - Yearning for eternity
  - Dealing with separation
- There was much mention of spirit or soul. Perhaps this matter needed greater discussion on the issue of death and dying.
Religious challenges

- Belief in afterlife has a profound impact on how one views death and dying.
- Belief in afterlife Influences our worldview
  - “Remember but we are travellers here...” Mary MacKillop
  - “This is all there is...” Kerry Packer
Religious challenges

- Belief or disbelief in afterlife therefore influences even our lifestyles
  - Encourage over-entertainment to avoid considering existential questions
  - See no problem with consumerism as it is the product of the philosophy that one should get maximum pleasure and comfort from life.
  - Over accentuation in entertainment and consumerism fuels climate change
Religious challenges

- Figures quoted by Rev Merrill Kitchen are alarming for religious circles if reflected in all traditions.
  - 75% of church goers believed in God
  - 45% believed in an afterlife
  - 53% believed there was a heaven
  - 33% believed in hell
  - 32% believed in Satan
- Is there a rational basis to belief in afterlife in theologies of faith traditions?
Religious challenges

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Secular challenges

- Palliative care and approach to death and dying from the secular perspective:
  - Death is an end. Don’t know what is beyond death. Most likely there is nothing.
  - The most humane thing to do would be to end physical pain in a dying person. This would make the dying rest in peace and reduce the emotional pain of loved ones.
  - Therefore, allowing euthanasia is humane and morally acceptable.
Secular challenges

- Our society is designed around forgetting death.

- Positive Advanced Care Planning results show we need to manage the process of dying not simply forgetting.
  - 86% of people were happy and satisfied with Advanced Care Planning
  - 30% of people are happy and satisfied without Advanced Care Planning

- Remembering death seems beneficial for the dying person and their families.
Secular challenges

- Our society is designed around forgetting death.
  - How do we balance the focus on this world and the next?
  - The challenge is for people of religion not to be engulfed in this and remind themselves about death.
  - Is it at all possible to reconcile materialistic worldview and belief-centric worldview?
Considerations around life and dying should not assume issues can be addressed by laws only. Society and human conscience should not be given their space as well.
Secular challenges

- Euthanasia and Abortion debate
  - Perspective and experiences of palliative care workers are seldom if at all considered in the debate.
  - Who owns life? This question is a core question?
    - Religious view - God owns life. God gives life and takes life even if it means physical suffering in dying.
    - Secular view – Everyone owns their own life, can chose to end life if faced with intolerable pain.
Secular challenges

- Euthanasia and Abortion debate

- Do medical advances make dying easier or harder?
  - Medical advances and care certainly increased life expectancy and reduced physical pain during life.
  - However, living longer means living a longer elderly life usually grappling with multiple health problems or cancer towards dying.
  - This is not an issue or something to address but just an observation that we humans create new problems trying to find solutions.
Secular challenges

- Euthanasia and Abortion debate
  - We have to be ethically consistent in approaching life and death matters.
  - Sometimes ethical contradictions are exposed when euthanasia and abortion is considered together.
  - Are there multiple solutions to the same problem?
  - Our legal philosophy does not have ethical and methodological clarity and consistency.
Secular challenges

- Other issues
  - Need of new cemeteries for those faith traditions who have to bury their dead.
  - Being buried outside of cemeteries. This can be allowed in certain cases.
Conclusions

- There is a need for greater collaboration and a holistic approach to palliative care combining both religious and secular approaches to minimise physical as spiritual pain in death and dying.

- Issues around death and dying exposes limitations of modernity which is designed to make us happy in this world. We need to expand its scope and evolve it to meet all human needs in this world and the next.
End