

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE DISPOSING OF HUMAN LIFE

JOSEF FUCHS, S.J.

Gregorian University, Rome

THE TOPIC of this essay is not the problem of the disposing of human life—whether considered from the point of view of philosophy or of moral theology. Nor is our concern the fundamental ethical or the concrete casuistical problems which belong to that topic. Rather, in this essay I will deal with the basic question of the significance attached to the Christian faith in solving normative problems on the level of morally correct (right) behavior. But this question should not be approached theoretically; it should be presented exclusively by means of one example: the disposing of human life.

When we speak of the disposing of human life, one thinks immediately and to a large extent of biological life. This is not wrong, but more basically it is a question of earthly human existence. As such, the various possibilities of disposing of human life in some way through biological means play their particular roles. Here I am interested above all in the question of life/death, existence/nonexistence—and precisely as this question depends on human control, or lack of control, over these alternatives.

There is no doubt that this involves causing the death of other persons. This problem not only involves reflections on the value and dignity of human life and the so-called right of God as the Lord of human life; it also merits a reflection on the person's right to life within society. The question of prenatal killing (abortion) and of the killing of the new-born would belong to this group of problems. In this area there are certainly still many points which are open to discussion. Yet in general, neither philosophy nor theology considers the prohibition against taking the life of another as admitting of absolutely no exception. In the case of the taking of one's own life, the question of the right to life does not arise; rather, it raises the question of the moral justification of killing in view of the value and dignity of human life as well as that of the sovereign right of God over all human life.

In what follows, I shall limit myself (though not exclusively) to the problem of the taking of one's own life, whether in suicide or in a sacrificial death or in euthanasia. The problem of "Christian faith and the disposing of human life" seems to be especially acute today in this area.

Before I enter the actual problem, it seems reasonable to reflect briefly on (1) how Christians in the past and in the present have seen the problem of the disposing of human life, and (2) human or philosophical insights into the problem.

The fact that Christians from the very beginning opted for life, thus distinguishing themselves markedly from the position of, for example, the Stoics, whom they were often glad to follow in other questions, is presumably connected with their knowledge of the fifth commandment of the Decalogue as they understood it in that period. It was a question of the right of one's neighbor. Moreover, it is clear that their reflection on Jesus' teaching about respect for one's neighbor and his teaching about nonviolence found in the Sermon on the Mount was also important. It took a relatively long time for their position regarding military service, especially when it involved killing the enemy, to develop away from the original absolute "Christian" severity. But despite the growing inclination to take a less absolute view of the prohibition against the taking of life, the position of Christians even today in regard to the life of one's neighbor is surely influenced strongly by both the word of God on Sinai and of Jesus of Nazareth. Obviously, we have to do here with a kind of attitude of faith.

In addition to and independently of this respect for the neighbor and for his life, there is also the respect for human life as such. Human life is accepted—to use a word that is familiar though often misunderstood today—as "holy"; it is God's gift and belongs in this sense to Him alone. This respect for life comes to expression in early Christianity, for example, in the sharp rejection of the interruption of pregnancy. It is also expressed in the prohibition against hindering what is still only "potential" life, for example through contraception, through homosexual conduct, and (from the sixth century on) through masturbation. To this there corresponds the traditionally sharp condemnation of suicide and, when relevant, of euthanasia. Thus the Christians' respect for human life seems, to a large extent, to be in accord with their faith and religiously qualified. The formulation, found recently in both agnostics and Christian theologians, that the rejection of suicide and euthanasia presupposes a theistic (or Christian) faith, is significant on this point.

A reflection on the disposing of human life that is less dependent on faith but is simply "human" or even "philosophical" is becoming more and more widespread. The opinion which holds that only the (Christian) faith can substantiate a prohibition against suicide and euthanasia corroborates the approach of those humanists who, without faith in God, are unable to find any reason to reject these practices vis-à-vis a neighbor who is dying. Here it may be that a right to determine one's own life is

held to belong to the dignity of the human person; or it may be held that the prohibition—which has somehow been established—against the disposal of one's own life is not absolute, i.e., not without exceptions, especially in conflict situations; or it may be that one doubts the sufficient evidential value in the reasons offered for the prohibition.

The distinction between human insight and philosophical insight is not unimportant here, because it is possible that, despite deep human insights, we may not succeed in formulating convincing philosophical reasons. Apart from this, there are certainly initial insights which cannot be reduced to reasons that already exist.

As has been said, one frequently encounters today the formulation that only a theistic (Christian) belief in God could make a prohibition of the disposing of one's own life comprehensible; the problem would therefore be more religious than ethical. This formulation parallels the saying that everything is basically allowed when belief in God is lacking. Not only Kant and a good many (agnostic) humanists, but also many Protestant and Catholic philosophers and theologians, take issue with this saying. In other words, one certainly is able to suppose an authentic human self-understanding that in principle knows something of the dignity of human existence in our time, and of a corresponding limitation on the disposing of this existence. Even where such an original insight is not admitted, plausible philosophical reasons for these intimations can be offered.

Furthermore, there is a false alternative in the formulations "Without faith everything is allowed" and "Without faith there is no good reason to prohibit the taking of one's own life." Theism and atheism do not form the human (or philosophical) basis for a solution to the problem facing us here—the disposing of one's life. Rather, the solution's foundation is human self-understanding qua human. At least in explicit reflection, however, this will always be influenced beforehand by a theistic, atheistic, or agnostic option or "faith." Nevertheless, the dignity of the human person, as an end in himself and as a moral being capable of responsible self-realization, is fundamentally accessible to insightful experience. But since this dignity presupposes biological life, there may be more to be said about the question of the disposing of such life.

There is yet another question: Precisely to what level of detail are we able to find convincing or at least sufficiently plausible solutions relative to our problem? At what level will they appear reasonable to others? We may perhaps believe that we have moral, though not metaphysical, certainty in the case of particular solutions. But, as already suggested, the exceedingly various human or philosophical convictions are presumably influenced by a set of global options or beliefs in an unconscious way.

What set of comprehensive beliefs with its corresponding self-understanding conditions the formulations asserting that the disposing of one's own life, or at least a "rational" self-realization understood in terms of freedom, belongs to the essential dignity of the human person? Or that accordingly it is not necessary that every realization of life that is possible-in-itself must be realized? Or that finally, by way of comparison, death must not be considered the greatest evil for a human person?

Against this stand several prohibitory considerations that may perhaps be influenced by another set of beliefs. We are told that self-destruction is still in principle a self-affirmation and therein it contains an internal contradiction: Is this a valid argument? We are told that the taking of one's own life makes the person lord over himself and thereby confronted with an internal contradiction: Is this argument valid? We are told that taking one's own life contradicts the innermost natural tendency for self-preservation: Does this argument hold without exception? We are told that one who takes his own life escapes from the obligatory full development of himself as a person as well as from his essential role in the society to which he belongs: Is this a valid argument? We are told that it would be a contradiction to say that by hastening death freedom would deprive itself of the life that is a necessary condition of freedom's own existence: Is this a conclusive argument?

It appears that behind such arguments lies the philosophical thesis that by taking one's own life a person assumes that which rightfully belongs only to the Creator; one evades the Creator's will that we should fully develop the life He has given us; one escapes from the time of testing that the Creator has ordained. Both Thomas Aquinas¹ and Pius XII² understand these questions to be philosophical. But are they not really hidden theological questions? Are they not questions that have arisen out of an inspiration of faith, but are then accessible to human reflection? This is how they are understood, e.g., by Edward Schillebeeckx in his second book on Christ.³ Similarly, Helmut Thielicke⁴ holds that solutions discovered in the area of faith bearing on the human right to dispose of life must not be lost in a secularized society. Both authors imply, then, that the questions concerning the disposing of human life are fundamentally problems of human ethics and not only of faith and

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Sum. theol.* 2-2, 65, 5; cf. 1-2, 94, 2.

² Pius XII, "Trois questions religieuses et morales concernant l'analgésie," *AAS* 49 (1957) 127 f. and 146.

³ E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus As Lord* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 590 f.

⁴ H. Thielicke, *Wer darf sterben? Grenzfragen der modernen Medizin* (Freiburg: Herder, 1979) 82.

religion. However, this does not exclude the possibility that they are concerned with Christian faith as well.

So we see that one must not underestimate the importance that the Christian faith has in its relationship to the ethical question of the disposing of human life. The question becomes all the more pressing since today not only atheists but also Protestant and Catholic theologians speak in favor of a complete reduction of the problem to theology alone. The theologians who hold this to be necessary do so particularly because the attempts at philosophical solutions seem to them to lack insight and are indeed very uncertain. The questions that arise are these: Does the Christian faith supply essential insights and solutions to the problem of the disposing of human life, insights and solutions that cannot be understood on the basis of any other *Weltanschauung*? Or does Christian faith deepen genuine human insights, maieutically open the way for an understanding that is humanly possible? Can faith say something more precise about the absoluteness, or perhaps only a "limited absoluteness" (*sit venia verbo*), of accepted solutions? Can faith give a greater certainty if human attempts at a solution remain more or less open to discussion? Finally, should faith be a help primarily against atheistic positions or against the weakness of merely human attempts at solutions?

FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM: DOES CHRISTIAN FAITH MAKE THE
NORMATIVE DECISION

1. *Theological Considerations against an Excessive Demand on Faith*

At the beginning of my reflection on this concrete problem, I should like to proffer a general admonition by the respected Protestant theologian Gerhard Ebeling: "It is urgent to warn against hastily bringing the subject matter of theology to bear against philosophy, rather than patiently participating in wrestling with the reasonableness of reason."⁵ Ebeling is speaking along the line of Paul Tillich's words: "one becomes bitter if one sees how theologians, who explain the concepts of the Old and the New Testament, use many expressions which have been developed by the deep reflections of the philosophers and the creative power of the speculative spirit, and then condemn with cheap objections those very expressions which have so extraordinarily enriched the language. No theologian should be taken as a serious theologian, even if he is a good Christian and a great scholar, when his work shows that he does not take philosophy seriously. . . ."⁶ On the other hand, especially with

⁵ G. Ebeling, *The Study of Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 65.

⁶ P. Tillich, "Biblische Religion und die Frage nach dem Sein," in *Die Frage nach dem Unbedingten* (Gesammelte Werke 5; Stuttgart: Evangelisches Bibelwerk, 1964) 141 f.

the topic of this essay, it is necessary to emphasize the theological necessity of investigating the possible and actual significance of the Christian faith for the ethical problem of the disposing of human life. No one denies that faith is significant in this ethical question. The real question is *what* significance faith has for the question of a normative moral system. Does the ethical question become fundamentally a religious one? Then will faith determine the content of the solution to the ethical question either by establishing a solution that could not *de facto* be found or understood by ethics, or else by supporting ethical attempts at a solution by means of a wholly different set of criteria? Or does faith provide a model of how the Christian, as a Christian, must attempt to provide the world with a corresponding solution? Or is it the case that the Christian faith and theological love are in fact concretized in the humanly possible attempts at a solution? That is, does a human ethical solution find in faith a dimension and meaningfulness that transcends itself and thus, at the same time, offers to the Christian who is searching for a solution a further and specific motivation for the respectful treatment of human life that is ethically required, and for the conscientious observance of the answers that are sought and found?

When I reflect on the ethical question of the disposing of human life—that of others and one's own—I naturally do this as a believing Christian. Hence the reflection as a personal act is always at once religious and human. In this sense I can never arrive at solutions which would be hypostatized abstractions, either of faith or of human (indeed ahistorical) reason. The Chalcedonian doctrine of the unity of Christ does indeed permit a "communication of the properties," but not the abandonment of the distinction between divinity and historical humanity with the individual and particular function of each. The single religious reflection on the ethical question about the disposing of human life may not back away from the question of what human insight and what Christian faith contribute to the solution of the question.

The Christian faith itself, which should help us in the search for moral answers, bears in itself as a condition of its own possibility a human self-understanding and a human moral experience. We need not settle here the question of how far human and ethical self-understanding precedes faith, or whether it first becomes active *in* the encounter with the offer and the acceptance of faith. Human and moral self-understanding is nothing other than the gift of the truth about oneself, and thereby of the meaning of one's own self as this meaning forms the basis for the multiple values and norms of human realities.

Such a self-understanding is impossible without a final reference that is not further reducible and beyond which no questions can be asked. At

a congress of moral theologians in 1977,⁷ Schillebeeckx, together with other contemporary theologians and philosophers, called this a basic experience, a fundamental confidence, for which it is possible to adduce reasons that are perhaps philosophically good but not probative (although they can become certainty in faith for one who is able to believe). Karol Wojtyla and his Polish friends speak a similar language.

The Christian faith in creation points in the same direction. God "is really able to create" in man "a free Other over against Himself and oriented toward Himself."⁸ "God can set us so free in His omnipotence that we indeed are something over against Him and oriented towards Him. Here, dependence and autonomy are realities that stand in equal proportions and not in inverse proportions to each other."⁹ The human person, experiencing himself in this way as open to transcendence,¹⁰ experiences the moral task that belongs to his most inner being. He seeks a clear understanding of the multiplicity of the values available to him, of their hierarchy, and of their capacity to make a demand on him. For this, however, the attempts of immense periods of humanity's history and continually new efforts are required. Most certainly, life—man's human existence—is among the values declared by man as good. How is he to manage this, dispose of this, and deal with the continuance of life and with death? The question is all the more acute when he realizes that life is not the highest of goods. It is only in the case of "a life that is led in free responsibility . . . that one can and must say: it is the highest of goods for the human person, an absolutely untouchable value."¹¹

The openness to transcendence which the person experiences makes it possible for him to accept the freely offered gift of faith and of God's self-communication in grace. These are seen as gifts given to the human person precisely in his freedom as the "Other" created by God. It follows that all of human freedom and all ethical striving is integrated in these.¹² They can, accordingly, also give light and inspiration in the human

⁷ E. Schillebeeckx, "Glaube und Moral," in *Ethik im Kontext des Glaubens*, ed. D. Mieth and F. Compagnoni (Freiburg: Herder, 1978) 17–45, at 29–31.

⁸ K. Rahner, *Praxis des Glaubens: Geistliches Lesebuch*, ed. K. Lehmann and A. Raffelt (Freiburg: Herder, 1982) 139; ET, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ A. Auer, "Die Unverfügbarkeit des Lebens und das Recht auf einen natürlichen Tod," in *Zwischen Heilaufrag und Sterbehilfe*, ed. A. Auer, A. Menzel, and A. Eser (Cologne: Heymann, 1977) 1–51, at 18.

¹¹ A. Keller, "Lebensqualität," *Stimmen der Zeit* 202 (1984) 33 f.

¹² Cf. E. Jünger, *Death: The Riddle and the Mystery* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) passim; Thielicke, n. 4 above; on the concept of *Glaubenssinn*, K. Rahner, "The Problem of Genetic Manipulation," *Theological Investigations* 9 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 225–52, esp. 238–45; on Christian inspiration and universalibility, Schillebeeckx, n. 3 above.

person's difficult ethical quest. But insofar as this is only a light,¹³ there must still be in principle the question of an accessible moral truth that is comprehensible to human and moral self-understanding. It is a case, then, of genuine humanism (not, therefore, specifically atheistic or agnostic or theistic humanism), and not of an ethics of faith that is added on to this or stretched out before this.

In treating the problem of the right to life and the right to take life, reference has been made in some way in all periods since Aristotle to the dignity of the human person, of his existence, and of his life. This dignity has been understood as a dignity that belongs to the human person who in freedom lives and historically actuates the meaning of his own self; so Kant saw man as "an end in himself." From the standpoint of creation theology, man is the "Other" who has been sent forth in freedom through God's omnipotence. The question about the disposing of human life, that of others and one's own, must respect this "truth" of the human person. It is not solved by merely accepting an "instruction" that comes from outside—from God, for instance. Because earthly existence, life, is not an absolute good, and not the highest good of man, it can be understood why the problem of the disposing of human life will never find a generally accepted solution that goes into points of detail.

Since Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹⁴ and Karl Barth,¹⁵ and continuing in Germany under the influence of "Barth's disciple" U. Eibach,¹⁶ there has been for some time a very strong tendency to replace the human and philosophical reflection which has been presented here with one completely dependent upon theology. Interestingly enough, there are similar tendencies on the part of Catholics today.¹⁷ The central thesis declares that the human person, who is a sinner, has no value whatever as his own; all his value lies outside himself, in the loving call made by the God of the covenant. It follows that a value possessed by the human person would play no role at all in the problem of the disposing of human life, one's own or that of others. Consequently, the prohibition against the disposal of human life could be based only in the will of God, from whom the dignity of being called is derived. This alone would provide the justification under certain circumstances of an affirmative and partial disposing of human life.

It is not possible for me to grasp such a thesis, whether from the

¹³ Cf. Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 46.

¹⁴ D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. E. Bethge (London: SCM, 1959) 209 f.

¹⁵ K. Barth, *passim*, quoted in U. Eibach, *Recht auf Leben—Recht auf Sterben: Anthropologische Grundlegung einer medizinischen Ethik* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1974) 123–279. See also Eibach's *Medizin und Menschenwürde: Ethische Probleme in der Medizin aus christlicher Sicht* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1976) 276.

¹⁶ See especially Eibach, *Medizin*.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Auer, "Die Unverfügbarkeit des Lebens" 20.

standpoint of human philosophy or from that of creation theology. I do not see how it is possible, without the dignity which is given to the human person but is fully his own, to arrive at the encounter with the love of God which gives the basis of a final dignity; nor do I understand the dignity of the call of God that is not a dignity belonging to us, if this does not integrate in itself a dignity that belongs to the human person (and this is explicitly allowed, e.g., by Eberhard Jüngel and Helmut Thielicke¹⁸). And if this fundamental thesis does affirm occasional possibilities of the disposing of human life—as a permission or a command from God¹⁹—then I do not see how the divine permission or the divine command can be recognized by us, other than through the self-reflection of the human person with the dignity that is his. It seems to me that neither the high dignity of the human person, which is doubtless based in the relationship between God and man, nor this relationship's future promise of a life-to-come understood in a Christian sense, can bring the problem of the right of disposing of human life to concrete solutions. We shall have to discuss this point further.

2. *Theological Recourse to the Bible and Its Effective History*

Instead of continuing the preceding reflections immediately, let us first turn our attention to another theological approach. Some believe that beyond any theological reflection is a simpler and more direct way to a solution for the problem at hand. One endeavors to show that God Himself in the tradition of the Old Testament and especially of the New (Sermon on the Mount) has already given the answer to the present question about the disposing of human life. One need only look in the handbooks of moral theology, even those of a quite recent period. In the same regard, one may read documents of the Church's magisterium, episcopal pastoral letters, and much religious-ethical literature. One who believes that he possesses the truth by attempting such a recourse is naturally convinced that he already has all, or at least most, of the answers. Consequently one can do without further human reflection or recourse to philosophy. But are we not dealing with an uncritical and narrow theology?

In the holy books of the OT the statement occurs repeatedly that both life and death have their origin in the God worshiped by Israel. These words have not seldom been overinterpreted; some have wanted to read in them that the sovereign (and not only transcendental) right over life and death belonged to the Creator alone.²⁰ Man would therefore have no

¹⁸ See, e.g., Jüngel, *Death* 168, and Thielicke, *Wer darf sterben?* 82.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Eibach, *Recht auf Leben* 177, 204, 232.

²⁰ See J. Fuchs, "Das Gottesbild und die Moral innerweltlichen Handelns," *Stimmen der Zeit* 202 (1984) 363–82, esp. 374 ff.

right over the disposing of human life. Basically, however, such biblical formulations are considered only the reverential expression of the transcendent superiority of the Creator, to whom even life and death are subject. The believing Israelite saw in such words no contradiction to the frequent killings that were lawful in the OT. It is thus that our theology and our Church must read and understand such texts today. Such an effort will not become contradicted when it finds that such words have been read and understood differently in the course of tradition and have had a corresponding effective history.

In this regard, the double account of the Ten Commandments and their origin in the OT becomes much more important. On this point, both the official ecclesiastical proclamation and the preaching in church, as well as much of the moral theology being done, should be more careful and speak with greater theological clarity and accuracy. Modern exegesis is universally agreed²¹ that the two narratives of the Ten Commandments in the OT are not completely the same. The narrative of the origin of the Decalogue and of its relationship to a theophany in which God would have spoken and written is traced to a relatively late redactional event. The Decalogue (above all, the fourth through tenth commandments) is less a moral revelation than a short summary of some principles that were socially significant for Israel, through whose observance the people responded to the God of the covenant. One of these points is the "fifth commandment." This speaks not simply of "killing" (disposing of human life) but only of the arbitrary killing (murder) of a personal, especially defenseless, enemy. Moreover, the Decalogue as a whole knows in various ways a killing that is seen as justified—hence a human disposing of human life. Theologically speaking, therefore, it is wrong to appeal directly to the text of the narrative of the Decalogue against the death penalty, war, and self-defense, against prenatal or neonatal killing, against sacrificial death, suicide, and euthanasia. The immense effective history of the fifth commandment is to be traced in part to a later reading of the OT text, but also to a deeper understanding and evaluation of the reality of human life, of human existence, as the gift of the living God of creation and the covenant. It is theologically significant that the fifth commandment of the Decalogue has had such an enormous effective history under the efficacy of the Spirit of God at work in the salvific history of the OT and NT. This is seen, for instance, in the Sermon on the Mount. Nonetheless, one cannot simply deduce solutions for the many contemporary problems involving the possible disposing of human

²¹ Cf., e.g., H. Schüngel-Straumann, *Der Dekalog—Gottes Gebot?* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1973); F. L. Hossfeld, *Der Dekalog: Seine spätere Fassungen, die originale Komposition und seine Vorstufen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982).

life from this effective history, especially since even it does not exclude all disposing of human life.²²

3. *Theological Recourse to the Christian Belief in Creation*

Instead of appealing directly to the Bible, some appeal just as often or even more frequently to the Christian belief in creation. They hold that one can find in it a surer justification for the nondisposability of human life than they would through human or philosophical insight. The Christian faith speaks to us of a God whom the atheist or agnostic does not know, and who is different in part from the God believed in by Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism. He is also somehow different from the God of Judaism who is confined to the OT. But the image of God that many Christians make for themselves, on the basis of the revealed God, likewise takes on various forms which are simply not reflective of the biblical faith in God.²³ This is true even of images of God that an occasional Christian, even official, proclamation sometimes transmits to us. The question of whether and to what extent they can be significant for the solution of the ethical question of the disposing of human life depends in large measure on one's faith in God and on one's image of God.

Probably the most widespread image of God is that which understands the Creator as the sole Lord over human life, over the earthly existence of man, and thus over life and death, whereas it consistently gives to the human person the right of disposing of other created realities. This is also the image of the God who wills human life to be a time of testing, in which, consequently, He and He alone has the right to determine the duration and the various circumstances of the test. It is the image of the God who has His plan for the life of each individual, a plan we, however, cannot know. It is, therefore, the image of a God to whom we must passively yield up our life, and still more our death. It is the image of a God whom humanists and atheists cannot grasp. The question arises: Is this the Christian image of God, on the basis of which we can or must solve the ethical problem of the disposing of human life?

Important difficulties stand in the way of this widespread image of

²² One could be tempted to have recourse to one or other text of the Bible to use in theological reflection. For example, it is related at the end of the First Book of Samuel (1 Sam 31:1-6) that Saul, badly wounded, asked his armor-bearer to kill him. Out of fear, the armor-bearer refused, and Saul killed himself with his own sword. In a different version at the beginning of the Second Book of Samuel (2 Sam 1:1-16), an Amalekite from Saul's camp confesses to David (perhaps lying, in the hope of gaining favor) that he acceded to Saul's request and slew him; David has the Amalekite executed for his action. But note that the explicit reason for the punishment is that the person killed by the Amalekite was Saul, the anointed king; neither the killing as such nor the request of Saul is censured.

²³ See Fuchs, "Das Gottesbild" passim.

God. Is the God of Christian faith really the God who understands the life span of man, with the conditions of his life, fundamentally and primarily as a time of testing that looks towards judgment? Is He truly the God who has created us as partners in the ordering of the world, exempting this partnership in regard to the disposing of human life, and above all over the method and point in time of our death? Is he really the God who works in every event of this world through secondary causes,²⁴ except in the determination of the duration and the circumstances of human dying, when the human person acts as the secondary cause? Is He a God who stands over against the human person as a rival with regard to man's life and death?

Or is there not another image that better corresponds to the Christian faith: the image of a God who has created the human person in His own image as an "Other" to be His partner? This would mean that the person is responsible for all levels of human life, including health, life, and death. Understood as one created in God's image and standing as His partner in the world, the person cannot dispose of either his life or his death arbitrarily. Yet God has not informed the human person whether He really requires of him the full development of the whole potential of his life or under the circumstances expects of him a seemingly unwarrantable steadfastness. In accordance with Scripture, I believe that we should understand Him rather as the God of love, who is present transcendentally in the innermost depth of everything that happens on earth, and who charges the person-as-partner created in His own image with the duty of the appropriate and correct analysis and the execution of these events. God does not Himself appear as the one who inflicts disaster and illness, who imposes dreadful destinies on human lives, who determines a sudden death or fatal accidents or a painful lingering infirmity or a mild death, so that the human person may only suffer them in humility. If He is the God who customarily works in this world through secondary causes, then on what theological grounds can we exclude that this should also be the case through responsible healing and nursing, or through keeping alive and letting die (letting oneself die), or through an artificial shortening of life—that is to say, by a curtailment of the dying process, therefore also by the free hastening of the end of life, which too is the hastened end of earthly freedom? Indeed, in this case the responsible theological judgment must consider that the freedom sacrificed for the sake of other values is not, as is sometimes said, a moral value but rather only a human value, i.e., the possibility of realizing moral values. Such would be the case in any sort of killing.

²⁴ Cf. B. Weismahr, *Gottes Wirken in der Welt: Ein Diskussionsbeitrag zur Frage der Evolution und des Wunders* (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1973).

I do not judge here in favor of any one of the possibilities I have named; rather, I wish to make the point that the appeal to the Christian God of creation as such and the solution of the problem of the disposing of human life do not open the door to a divinely given answer. The solution to the problem or the attempt at such solutions is entrusted to the person-as-partner who is created in God's image. Man and woman must, as far as possible, be constantly aware of the responsibility of their partnership, reflective of the image of God in which they were created, in the quest for tenable solutions. The believing Christian is ahead of many others in this regard.

4. *Recourse to the God of the Covenant*

As has already been said, the attempt (which I cannot copy) to understand human life and its dignity exclusively in the meeting of God and man that is bestowed from the outside by the God of the covenant does not seem to me able to produce any theological solution to the problem of the disposing of human life. It would doubtless follow from that consideration that it cannot be left to the human person to withdraw himself or others from this earthly encounter between God and man, and to determine the form of passage into the next life. Only where this interpersonal relationship on earth is utterly impossible would it be meaningful not to speak of human life, i.e., of the divine-human relationship on earth and human fidelity to it. But the possibilities mentioned above for a premature death or one painfully drawn out, of accidents and the artificial prolongation of life and death, would stand in the way of such a theological theory.

I cannot, therefore, see the reason for the nondisposability of human life being derived solely from the dignity of the graced relationship of God and man. Any reason for the prohibition lies in the created human person himself—in his own "truth." Accordingly, this is how he is integrated into the relationship that the God of creation and covenant has with humanity. This does not exclude but rather implies the fact that the dignity of human life, which as such is fundamentally nondisposable, is always set within that dignity which is experienced as a divine gift on the basis of the person's relationship to the God of creation and the covenant. This knowledge or faith may help him to remain ever aware of the obligations which arise from the dignity which is his own on the basis of creation.

5. *Recourse to the Death of Christ*

Karl Rahner once wrote: "The Christian—every Christian, at all periods—imitates Jesus in the concreteness of his life, by dying with him."²⁵ This is said not only of the duration of the life that is continually

²⁵ Rahner, *Praxis des Glaubens* 224.

dying to itself, but above all of the final and definitive death. The eternal Logos entered our human situation even to the point of death; in this sense he imitates us. But since he has died our death, we have to die his death: we imitate him, our dying is a sharing in his dying. Does this mean that we have to die in the manner of his death, an unavoidable death in abandonment?²⁶

Jesus' death was a violent annihilation. It was not the death that is known in most of the OT, a death ordained by God at the end of a fulfilled life. It was violent, therefore similar to death from a heart attack, from an epidemic, from a traffic accident, through the carrying out of the death penalty, and so on. It does not concern "an expression of the divine will . . . as a direct act of domination," but "through the mediation of secondary causes."²⁷ Cannot the same be said of the conflict situations that are "forced upon" us, ones in which many theologians (see below) would not dare to declare as absolutely unjustified sacrificial death, the taking of one's own life, or euthanasia? Then, however, it would be a dying in the manner of Christ: the experience of total powerlessness, of the total necessity to give oneself up.

What, then, is death as an imitation of the dying Christ? The acceptance of the experience of the God who always fundamentally has a claim over us! The experience of death as the punishment of sin.²⁸ The total giving up of oneself as an earthly reality, the final gift of self, the ultimate act of confidence, entering into the resurrection and into the incomprehensibility of God. Thus it would remain true that "If we live, we live to the Lord; if we die, we die to the Lord. Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."²⁹ "Neither death nor life . . . can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."³⁰ And lastly also, "for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."³¹

The aim of the preceding discussion has been to show only this: we should not make excessive demands of faith and expect from faith declarations that it perhaps cannot make.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

1. *A Convergence on the Basis of Faith*

After what has been said, the Christian faith cannot be the authority that alone is able to make a prohibition of the disposing of human life understandable. That may at first sound very negative; but this seems to

²⁶ Is Jesus' behavior a command for all? See the question in G. Virt, "Sterben auf Verlangen," *Theologisch-Praktische Quartalschrift* 125 (1977) 129-43, at 136 f. On the whole topic, see also G. Greshake, "Bemühungen um eine Theologie des Sterbens," in *Euthanasie oder Soll man auf Verlangen töten?* ed. V. Eid (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1975) 170-84.

²⁷ So. O. Pesch, quoted by Virt, "Sterben" 137.

²⁸ Rom 6:23.

³⁰ Rom 8:38 f.

²⁹ Rom 14:8.

³¹ Phil 1:21.

be the result of the preceding reflections. The fundamental problematic of this essay has been to reflect widely on faith insofar as it concerns normative ethics of behavior.

Yet something more can be added. The individual parts of the arguments so far presented bear in themselves a converging positive statement: they point in a particular direction. The effective history of the words of the OT, which goes much further than their immediate content, shows that human life, human existence, as the gift of the Creator, absolutely claims respect. The reflections on the God who "creates" for Himself in His omnipotence an "Other" as His partner, and chooses him for Himself in the covenant as His beloved partner, lets us understand what a deep respect God must expect for the life and the existence of the "Other" whom He has created and chosen. Jesus' ready and confident handing over of his earthly existence, of his life, to the Father bears witness to the Father as the one who truly possesses life.

Does not a large part of mankind basically understand human life in a manner analogous to what is expressed more clearly and powerfully in the Christian faith?

2. Situations of Conflict

However, a demand for this respect for life in the sense of an absolute prohibition of the disposing of human life cannot be based on faith. This is why ethics speaks of situations of conflict, which do not absolutely exclude the disposing of human life, nor at the same time abandon the demand for reverence in the presence of human life.

It has always been seen, in faith and without faith, that the prohibition of killing and the right to life are not absolute. We know the examples of the death penalty, self-defense, and the just war, even if we have become somewhat more cautious on these questions today.

I have heard from soldiers of the Second World War, who could not take their seriously wounded comrades with them when they retreated, that they saw themselves faced with the alternative of leaving them to a certain, long, and painful death, or else of giving them a quick death out of merciful love. They held the latter to be their duty as Christians. Further, many, including Christian theologians, held the self-sacrifice of Jan Palach to be justified as a powerful act of witness. It follows that they must make a similar judgment in the case of similar self-sacrifices of Buddhist monks. In addition, a generally positive answer has been given to the question that has arisen in our time of the justification of self-sacrifice as the only possible way to preserve an important state secret. One could doubtlessly add many other examples of killing and taking one's own life under the presuppositions of other cultures. In the

area of medical and biological capabilities, I have heard of justified interventions or “noninterventions” in terrible prenatal and neonatal situations. They were done in good faith by both religious and humanist doctors. Many theologians would not dare speak against those deciding in such situations.

Not only in the past has active euthanasia been practiced; it has become a “fashionable” problem openly discussed in our time. Not a few theologians have treated the problem openly, but usually very briefly. They see and lament a lack of human and Christian readiness to endure the process of dying, including suffering and pain. Rather than a concern with extreme cases in which it is doubtful whether God’s will and human reason demand a prolonged death, they consider the human person with his dignity as an end in itself and see him as the “Other” created as the partner of the Creator and as the beloved in the covenant between God and man, who may under certain circumstances responsibly and actively determine the treatment needed in the remaining time of life, and correspondingly the duration of the approaching death. They hold that this is not an unjustified escape from suffering, nor a withdrawal from the full development of one’s own possibilities in life, nor an unjustified autonomy vis-à-vis the plans of the God of creation and covenant. I could offer a list of well-known specialists in ethics and moral theology³² for further considerations, but let this account suffice.

As has been explained, it is not my task in this essay to pass a judgment on the disposing of human life. It has, nevertheless, been part of my task to draw attention to the concrete behavior of conscientious Christians in the light of their reflection on their faith. Likewise, it belongs to my task now to point to the theological justification that one believes justifies, by

³² Examples of those who would not absolutely exclude active euthanasia in borderline cases: P. Sporken, *Darf die Medizin, was sie kann?* (Düsseldorf: 1971) 36 f.; idem, “Euthanasie im Rahmen der Lebens- und Sterbehilfe,” in *Suizid und Euthanasie als human- und sozialwissenschaftliches Problem*, ed. A. Eser (Stuttgart: Enke, 1976) 271–84; Auer, n. 10 above; J. F. Dedek, *Human Life: Some Moral Issues* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1972) 130; very cautiously, Eid (n. 26 above) 89 f.; E. Drewermann, “Vom Problem des Selbstmords oder Von einer letzten Gnade der Natur,” *Studia moralia* 21 (1983) 313–78, and 22 (1984) 17–54; H. van Oyen, “Grenzfälle in der medizinischen Ethik,” *Zeitschrift für evangelische Ethik* 4 (1960) 139 ff.; Eibach, *Medizin und Menschenwürde* 203 f.; J. Wunderli, *Euthanasie oder die Würde des Sterbens* (Stuttgart: 1974) 156, 163 (174: “Seen from the doctor’s viewpoint, euthanasia is lived, deep communication with the dying Thou of the patient”); see also the contribution of F. S. Cahill, J.-P. Jossua, and A. Kuitert in the recent issue 3 of *Concilium* 1985. Here I should mention as well those who in certain circumstances make no ethical distinction between letting a person die and killing; cf. J. F. Keenan, “Töten oder Sterbenlassen?” *Stimmen der Zeit* 201 (1983) 825–37, with bibliography there (G. Hughes, J. Rachels, R. Ginters); also J. Fuchs, “Verfügen über menschliches Leben? Fragen heutiger Bioethik,” *ibid.* 203 (1985) 75–86, at 78 ff.

way of exception, a behavior in difficult situations of conflict that while departing from the universally normative formulation of the nondisposability of human life, does not diminish the respect that is commanded by the norm. It is now possible to reflect theologically on these justifications. I refer, broadly, to three such attempts at justification.

The first attempt is typical for many Protestant theologians. They uphold the absoluteness of the will of God, which admits of no exception. This will states: no human disposing of human life! To do so would contradict the sovereignty of the Creator. It would contradict the call of the God of the covenant, who alone determines the duration and circumstances of the concrete relationship between God and man in the covenant. According to some theologians, it would also contradict the God of creation as He is the ultimate foundation of any natural law.³³ Because the particular world in which we live, however, is marked by sin, they believe that it is possible to be in a conflict situation whose solution is judged to be too excessively demanding. One assumes that neither would God expect of the human person an overly demanding solution in these situations; hence, from the point of view of the human person, Christian love must override a kind of "natural law" and take on itself the corresponding guilt of disobedience of God's prohibition.³⁴ In such a situation of conflict, the act disposing of life would remain an act against God's commandment. God Himself, however, and only He could justify the human person in such a situation, or even command him despite the prohibition to do what is necessitated by our sinful world. Thus the agent (or sinner) would be justified by God, though not the act.

What are my difficulties with this attempt at a solution? First, I find excessively uncritical the assertion that is made of an absolute divine prohibition, admitting of no exceptions, against any disposing of human life; it is an assertion that is established neither in faith nor in human self-reflection. This applies to both the cases of the traditional so-called "divine delegation" in the death penalty, self-defense, and the just war, and also to special cases like that of Jan Palach or of one who bears a secret, or, finally, to the cases of euthanasia. Second, if one understands such "commands" or "norms" critically and not in this absolute and universally valid fashion, then the difficult distinction between the justification of the act and the justification of the agent becomes superfluous. Ultimately, we must arrive at the acceptance of a God-given justification or indeed of a divine commandment to act, appropriate to

³³ Especially Eibach, *Medizin und Menschenwurde*.

³⁴ Cf. Eibach, *ibid.* 243 f., following in this Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* 255 ff. Unlike Eibach, Wunderli sees the duty of love to be in contradiction here to the "natural law" (*Euthanasie* 156).

the necessities of the world that actually exists, by means of a process of human judgment in faith and in grace—not in accordance with an allegedly absolute prohibition. I understand this, however, to be simply the human discovery of the correct ordering of behavior, including the limits that are proper to this ordering—a human discovery which naturally is made in the light of faith and in the grace of the Spirit.

I encounter occasionally in Catholic theologians a second attempt at a solution of the situations of conflict.³⁵ In this view, it is presumed that in particular difficult cases absolute ethical norms of behavior come into conflict with each other. The Christian would, therefore, be condemned to do something morally incorrect (wrong) in order to be able to do something morally correct (right). In such a dilemma it would be the duty of the individual to discover which of the two demands of moral correctness (rightness) he must choose as the realization of what he judged to be most important. In this view towards a solution one cannot speak—unlike the case of the Protestant attempt—of an offense against the moral goodness of the person, because it is not a case of assuming guilt in the sense of personal morality, but of a readiness to make the free decision to do something that is morally incorrect (wrong), something that is understood to be forbidden by God. These considerations were frequently brought forward a few years ago in view of the problematic of *Humanae vitae*,³⁶ but they are also now heard, for example, in the area of euthanasia.

Already in the discussion about *Humanae vitae* it was pointed out that one would come nearer to the truth by speaking not of the conflict of ethical norms of behavior but of the conflict of human, not absolute, values or goods.³⁷ Such a conflict could be resolved by preferring the higher or more urgent good or value, and could lead in the concrete situation to the discovery of the single morally correct act as a moral demand. If, however, one remains with the formulation “conflict of norms” or “conflict of obligations,” then I would point out that norms of correct behavior are discerned and formulated in a human manner (though also in the light of faith and in the power of the grace of the Spirit), so that an apparent case of conflict could demonstrate that our formulation has not been entirely successful, i.e., we have not observed certain inherent limitations to our inadequate statement of the norm.

³⁵ This question is formulated most clearly by Auer, n. 10 above.

³⁶ On this see J. Fuchs, “‘Sünde der Welt’ und normative Moral,” in *Anspruch der Wirklichkeit und christlicher Glaube: Probleme und Wege theologischer Ethik heute*, ed. H. Weber and D. Mieth (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1980) 135–54.

³⁷ See, e.g., Ch. Robert, “La situation de ‘conflit’: Un thème dangereux de la théologie morale aujourd’hui,” *Revue des sciences religieuses* 44 (1970) 190–213; J.-M. Aubert, “Hiérarchie des valeurs et histoire,” *ibid.* 5–22.

Paul shows in the First Letter to the Corinthians that such cases of conflict are possible, and shows how they can be resolved³⁸ with his decision concerning the so-called Pauline privilege. It could at first sight astonish us, coming as it does so closely after his allusion to Jesus' words about faithfulness in marriage.

The third attempt at a solution of conflict situations, which can certainly be maintained theologically and philosophically, has already been sufficiently indicated through the reference to my difficulties about the first and second attempts at a solution. This attempt knows neither the assumption of guilt nor behavior that is against moral correctness (rightness). This attempt does not specify in what cases it could *de facto* justify the disposing of human life, but that, again, is a question which arises outside the limits of this essay.

3. Attitudes of Faith

Although one cannot adequately justify or make comprehensible the nondisposability of human life specifically on the basis of the Christian faith, one's faith does not therefore remain simply without significance for the behavior of Christians. I have already spoken of a dynamic and converging power which does not merely draw attention maieutically to good human behavior vis-à-vis human life and death, but makes such behavior understandable as specifically congruent with the Christian faith.

On this basis one could see much of the behavior of Christians vis-à-vis human life and death as an expressive behavior. In it the simple acceptance of death and of the painful dying process is not the expression of a certain kind of fatalism; it is rather a gesture of thanksgiving for the gift of life and its giver. Such a Christian attitude makes possible or less burdensome a humble endurance in the process of dying. Such a quality becomes the expression of the relationship of the Christian to his Lord, who was not merely compelled to endure his suffering and death, but rather, despite his spontaneous unwillingness, was ready to endure it. In such a death there comes to expression at the same time the faith and the confident hope in the passage that permitted Jesus' death to become a dying into the resurrection.

In any case, it is clear that the Christians' attitudes of faith give a way of facing death that is not possible to the atheist or the agnostic humanist. The images of God from other religious communities, different from the Christian image of God, likewise determine a different behavior, or at least a different expressive behavior, when compared with the attitude of the believing Christian.

³⁸ 1 Cor 7:12 ff.

Moreover, we should not overlook the following: whoever as a Christian sees as justified an intervention or the omission of an act in an apparent conflict situation and behaves accordingly, can and must do so in such a way that his necessary death does not give up a Christian expressive behavior nor withdraw from a death with Christ, whose death was carried out in precisely the same way. This is the case for him just as much as for one who in the end consciously rejects the application of "disproportionate means" by artificial life-support and so goes to his death.

The problem of Christian expressive behavior is different in cases where pain or weakness simply do not permit the realization of such an attitude. This problem becomes extreme when someone lies in a certainly irreversible coma. The question of an expressive behavior can only be addressed in such circumstances to those who care for the dying person. If one gives a positive answer in such situations to the controversial question of whether the justified act of letting a person die and active euthanasia are to be judged as equivalent and therefore morally similar,³⁹ one must still bear in mind that the justified act of letting a person die, as an expressive attitude, stands nearer to an attitude expressing respect vis-à-vis human life than does an active intervention.

One final remark on the theme of the attitudes of faith: in the cases of many Christians, another motive other than the attitudes of faith already named is at work in the humble and courageous endurance of a difficult process of dying, that is, many will be motivated by a sense of obedience, a willingness to go to the ultimate in the face of what a Christian proclamation has consistently emphasized as the unconditional will of God: no disposing of human life! The absoluteness, "in every case," of this proclamation, as has been said, will today sometimes have its validity questioned; when this happens, one would come again to the attitudes of faith which have been set out above, with their capacity to determine the expressive behavior of Christians.

4. Faith, Fundamental Experience, Philosophy

The faith of the Christian will not give him an unambiguous ethics with respect to the disposing or nondisposing of human life, but it will give him maieutic hints and empower him to determine particular attitudes of faith and corresponding expressive behavior.

Other images of God in other religions—for example, that of Islam or of Buddhism (insofar as this is theistic)—determine in part their own attitudes of faith and a corresponding ethical expressive behavior. This is equally true, if not indeed more so, in the case of the images of the human person held by atheistic or agnostic humanisms.

³⁹ Cf. Keenan, n. 32 above.

This does not mean that Christians and non-Christians, in the course of formulating and determining images of God and man, cannot have a deep fundamental experience of the dignity of human life and of its character as gift, or better, we should rather say that they in fact do. A certain ethical fundamental experience corresponds to such a fundamental experience. Such experiences can be richer than formulated convictions and systems, and can indeed stand in contradistinction to these, at least in part, to the extent that the categorial and philosophical reflections are one-sided or false.

Therefore, the Christian faith gives birth to particular attitudes without determining an unambiguous ethics concerning the disposing of human life. Many Catholic theologians set a question mark over the philosophical reflections and arguments in this question. The conjunction of a Christian reflection on faith, of philosophical thinking, and of an original moral experience has developed a particular ethics in the Catholic Church; it is one which goes into detail and tends to take itself rather absolutely, mediating not evident but concrete and often very useful orientations. When one maintains particular norms of behavior out of conviction, he believes himself to have moral certainty for the corresponding justificatory reasons; more is not possible. Nevertheless, differences of opinion on individual questions are possible within the Church's fellowship. Indeed, we know such differences. The statements of the Church's magisterium can be very helpful here; however, they too are no "moral dogma."