**The Iron Lady and assisted suicide**

**By Rev. James Coleman**

The 2011 movie the Iron Lady is a biography of Margret Thatcher’s life told from the perspective of her old age in the midst of dementia. The high points in the movie are the insights into her incredibly strong character and her determination to do what she thought was the right thing irrespective of the consequences.

But her story is told as flash backs as the increasingly confused Margret Thatcher, played by Meryl Strep, reminisces over her political life.

What has the Iron Lady got to do with assisted suicide? It is that the current secular definition of a person is such that the Iron Lady is well on the way to non-personhood. In secular thought a person is seen in terms of their ability to make autonomous choices. Quality of life is seen in the capacity of the individual to engage in critical reflection and to choose and pursue their own choices and self-interests, as long as they do not impede on the choices of others.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Australian Theologian McGovern, says that modern secular morality revolves around the idea that personal fulfilment is discovered through exerting freedom of choice particularly consumer choice.[[2]](#footnote-2) You see that every day with people recommending “retail therapy” if someone is feeling down.

One can see the emphasis on personal, individual, autonomous choice in the arguments for euthanasia and assisted suicide in this country. The quote below is from a supporter of euthanasia in New Zealand, called David, who blogged in support of assisted, suicide in the context of the suicides of two Wellington people:

*“SO WHAT if others were shocked to find they ended their own lives, GET OVER IT, it was their life NOT Yours or anyone else’s. The RIGHT to die should reside with the Person who wishes to Die and NO ONE ELSE, Especially not the Government … Let people Die if they are Terminally Ill, and let their Life Long companions join them if they so wish … Maybe our Law makers and any opposition to the RIGHT TO DIE, should sit through a few dozen dying peoples lasts weeks …”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Returning to Margret Thatcher the modern morality would reason that with dementia she has lost her ability to choose. She has lost her autonomy and therefore she has lost her personhood.

The Christian metaphysic’s of a person is different. A person is seen as a soul and a body. It looks to bodily resurrection not just a permanent disembodied spiritual existence after death. While we are alive, Christianity fully celibates our bodies: acknowledges their finiteness, their fragility and their propensity to embarrassment. Rodney Clap puts it well in Tortured Wonders[[4]](#footnote-4) when he says:

*“Every day hairs fall from our heads. Skin dries and flakes away. Fingernails break or are clipped and tossed. We blow our noses; we emit urine and faeces, menstrual blood or semen. All this is messy and we do our best to hide and tidy it.”*

The honouring of our bodies applies both to the disabled and the abled. We are all created in God’s image and are therefore important and valuable. One is still a person even if one can’t hide or tidy away the embarrassing functions of our bodies. We are still a person even if we lose our ability to choose carrots as opposed to peas. We are still a person even if we can’t remember the room number of our rest home accommodation. Even dementia patients say “I” am losing my memory.

Christian spirituality engages with the reality of a soul’s embodiment. It holds both these entities together as a whole. It honours us as persons with souls and with all our frailties and bodily embarrassments as being created in the image of God.

This reality is far broader than the narrow secular definition.[[5]](#footnote-5) That is why dying well is so important to Christians. There is more to come that what is offered in this life. What we do now matters later. We will not simply cease to exist on our deaths. All this informs why Christianity sees suicide as morally wrong.

Christianity’s also has a starting assumption, which recognises the ubiquitous potential in all humans towards evil, towards dark distortions. Conversely, secular culture assumes that humanity is inherently good and that people left to their own devices will always do good. Several centuries ago mothers would beg not to be taken to hospital following the birth of a child because the unsanitary conditions in hospitals meant that a huge proportion died of uterine post-partum infections**.**

What is true of physical hygiene is true of cultural hygiene. If we create an atmosphere where it is permissible to encourage killing in circumstances were life is difficult or costly, we will find subtle and not so subtle pressures being put on the vulnerable “to do the decent thing” and end it. If doctors are permitted to euthanize vulnerable patients in their care, then that same fear, which used to grip women who had just given birth will in all likelihood eventually grip the aged. The elderly will come to fear their children and the health profession: the disabled will fear their carer’s.

There is a disabled journalist in the United States who writes about how subtle negative assumptions by health professionals can be. He recounts as story concerning a conversation a doctor had with him as to whether it was worth giving him antibiotics to treat a sinus problem.[[6]](#footnote-6) In one instance he needed the forceful intervention of his wife to get treatment.

Columnist Rosemary McLeod wrote in the Dominion Post that the Christchurch earth quake saw children dragging their elderly parents to the bank to force them to withdraw cash. Others made off with the elderly’s EQC and insurance pay outs.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The current proposed euthanasia bill will also allow the mentally ill to kill themselves. How can that be anything other than abusive given that by definition they will not have capacity to make such decisions? And if people without capacity can be killed what will become of disabled children? Will parents be able to decide for them that they want to die?

It would be ironic indeed if the baby boomer generation, the generation whom round the world largely legislated for abortion and are most in support of euthanasia, became the first generation to start to fear their children and their motives.

1. Lynne Bowyer, *Autonomy and dementia: what has been left unthought* (Issue Thirty –Seven August 2012 The Nathaniel Report) p 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Summarised from John Kliensman’s essay The Common Good in an Age of Moral Hyperpluralism: A Catholic Bioethical Perspective’ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Quote from John Kliensman’s article quoting in turn from “comments”: http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/opinion/columnists/rosemary-mcleod/6849569/Wanting-help-to-die-is-not-the-Governments-business, accessed 24 October 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rodney Clap, Tortured Wonders: Christian Spirituality for People, Not Angles. (Bletchley: Scripture Union, 2003) p 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid p 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Suicide by choice: not so fast, *New York Times*  31 October 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dominion Post 1 November 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)