

# Assisted Dying Bill: The Church has no right to deny dignity in death

Posted: Thu, 10th Sep 2015 by [Keith Porteous Wood](#)

*The media give too much weight to the views of faith leaders who have failed to deal with the central issue of assisted dying, which is alleviating the suffering of others, argues Keith Porteous Wood.*

While religious leaders are as entitled as anyone else to express their views about the Assisted Dying Bill - about to be debated in Parliament - there is no doubt the media give the opinions of "faith leaders" disproportionate prominence.

This week a motley crew of them signed a letter opposing the Bill which featured in practically every major media outlet.

For some reason these religious leaders tend to be treated as possessing a moral acuity denied to the rest of us. As a result I fear many will have subconsciously imagined the letter carried an extra authority simply because it carried the imprimatur of some archbishop, imam or rabbi.

Despite acknowledging significant dissent from former Archbishop George Carey, the letter gave the impression it broadly echoed the views held by the faithful the signatories purport to lead. But does it?

In reality a [poll](#) by YouGov found that only 18% of the public who identified as belonging to a religion opposed "the legalisation of assisted dying for terminally ill adults with mental capacity".

The faith leaders have also failed to deal with the central issue of alleviating the suffering of others. While their letter acknowledges "there are still instances of painful or distressing death[s]", it seeks to downplay this. I hope none of the authors have to endure such a protracted and painful death. I found it unbearable to witness the gratuitous suffering of a close, dear, relative being starved and parched to death, then becoming mentally but not physically dead. There was not a murmur of dissent from those who had gathered around the bed night after night when I anguished - "if we did this to a dog, we would be prosecuted".

Despite my strong support for the principle, I am highly critical of the legislation itself, because it simply does not go far enough.

The proposals are probably the most conservative approach to this issue of all the countries that have enacted such legislation. Even if this law had been passed in time, it would have been of no use in the case of my relative. By the time "death from terminal illness" was regarded as imminent - which is what the Bill requires - the statutory six days of wait would have been six days of agony.

However, legislators must weigh up the consequences of blocking the Bill. These include the continuation of unofficial and totally unregulated euthanasia. Most people are aware this goes on in hospitals, so it must be on a large scale, and it is awful that doctors seeking to minimise unnecessary suffering face criminal sanctions. Some of those with terminal illnesses, who know what is coming as their disease progresses and want to avoid it, will continue to be forced to make

the trip to Switzerland in order to avoid further pain and indignity.

I had hoped the Archbishop of Canterbury might have reflected on the parallels between this and the Church's battle against the same-sex marriage bill, which the bishops also failed to win and subsequently lost so much respect over.

As with that battle, the majority of the population (including the religious) wanted the change and considered it a matter of compassion and yet the bishops ignored them.

On this issue, as on many others, those who rise to the top of religious organisations appear to be very much less morally progressive than their flocks.

I plead with MPs to remember that the public expects them to act with compassion. They must also remember that nothing in the Bill is compulsory. Those not wishing to avail themselves of the freedom the Bill affords need not do so.

Most importantly of all, before voting, MPs should reflect on why they think they have the right to deny others a relatively painless and dignified death.

*Keith Porteous Wood is the executive director of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the NSS. This article was originally published by [Politics.co.uk](http://Politics.co.uk).*

## Keith Porteous Wood

Keith Porteous Wood is the president (and former executive director) of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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