

The present Dutch debate on „completed life“ as challenge for Public Theology

Ad de Bruijne

1. Introduction

“My conception and birth I could not decide for myself. But at the end of my life I will emphatically demand that right.” This provocative statement was made by the famous Dutch neurobiologist Dick Swaab.¹ He is one of the Dutch celebrities who have propagated the concept of a “completed life”.² A debate has been raging for more than 10 years now. After the 2002 bill on euthanasia and assisted suicide, the next step is completed life (CL): not only those are in view who suffer unbearably and without perspective from medical causes, but also those who sincerely believe that their life is complete or no longer meaningful. Meanwhile, special counsellors are being trained to guide such people in their choice for dying.³ Contrary to what is often thought outside of the Netherlands, this debate has not yet been decided. The Dutch doctors’ organization, which advocated the euthanasia law, does not support this next step.⁴ Courts prove reluctant as well. At the beginning of 2018, the Supreme Court confirmed a prison sentence in the famous Heeringa case.⁵

¹ Dick Swaab, *Wij zijn ons brein: van baarmoeder tot Alzheimer*, Amsterdam/Antwerpen 2010/2012, 423.

² <http://www.uitvrijewil.nu/index.php?id=10> (accessed February 6, 2019).

³ Chiara Kessler, A Completed Life. *Survival* 60, 3 (2018), 231–34; Henk ten Have and Jos Welie, *Death and Medical Power. An Ethical Analysis of Dutch Euthanasia Practice*, Maidenhead 2005.

⁴ KNMG, “Completed life” – wish understandable, but legislation undesirable, <https://www.knmg.nl/advies-richtlijnen/knmg-publicaties/publications-in-english.htm> (accessed February 6, 2019).

⁵ Peter de Graaf, Advocaat-generaal adviseert Hoge Raad: laat straf Albert Heringa, die moeder bij zelfdoding hielp, in stand, *De Volkskrant* January 31, 2018.

In 2008 Heeringa had helped his mother, who was not eligible for euthanasia, by mixing lethal medicines in her food at her request, which she then ate herself. Also telling was the public turmoil at the beginning of 2018 about a pro-euthanasia organization selling a mysterious lethal powder, probably a preservative for meat. Would this sale prove legal, the entire discussion about CL would be rendered obsolete. Many consider this undesirable, although within four months the membership of that organization has risen from 3,000 to 20,000.⁶ Almost sixty percent of the population are said to support legal facilities for people opting for the possibility of a self-chosen death.⁷ The Netherlands pioneer these developments, but other countries follow, just as has been the case with the acceptance of same-sex marriage. For example Belgium, Luxembourg, New Zealand and some American states also allow euthanasia, while Australia and Great Britain are considering changing the law. In Switzerland, it is even legal for people who are not doctors to euthanize someone, and even foreigners may use this possibility, summoning a kind of tourism of death.⁸ These developments challenge Christians everywhere. How should they respond? In this article I consider the challenge of the Dutch debate on CL for public theology. First I present an analysis of the Dutch context. Then I summarize some arguments from both sides of the debate. To that I add an analysis of Christian contributions, to finally conclude with my own proposal.

2. Completed life in the Netherlands

In 2002, after 20 years of public debate, legislation was issued that, under certain conditions, would allow both termination of life on request and assistance with suicide. Moral rejection and punishment remained in force, but could be suspended in exceptional cases for reasons of mercy. Review committees assess each case using a well-defined set of criteria. Is there unbear-

⁶ Enzo van Steenberg, Ruim 300 mensen kopen “laatste wil-poeder”, *NRC* February 8, 2018.

⁷ Zembla, Meeste Nederlanders positief over euthanasie, <https://zembla.bnnvara.nl/nieuws/meeste-nederlanders-positief-over-euthanasie> (accessed February 8, 2018).

⁸ Daryna Oratovska, Factors which contributed to the legalisation of euthanasia in the Netherlands, Masterthesis Utrecht University 2015, <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/bitstream/handle/1874/317688/master%20thesis%20Oratovska%20final.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y> (Accessed February 6 2019).

able suffering without prospect of improvement? Was the request voluntary and well-informed? Did a second, independent doctor support the termination of life? Since 2011, severe loneliness and an accumulation of complaints of old age have also been acknowledged as potentially unbearable and hopeless suffering. Between 2003 and 2016, the number of reports of euthanasia increased sharply: from 2000 to 7000 yearly. Euthanasia now counts for 4% of all deaths, while for cancer patients it has become something of a default mode. Legislation has lowered the threshold. Since 2012, the establishment of mobile end-of-life clinics, compensating for doctors who refuse cooperation, has facilitated the practice.⁹

Notwithstanding these developments, a growing number of citizens judge the law to be insufficient. Empirical research has uncovered a category of people who appear to be excluded. In 2016 Van Wijngaarden defined them as people who feel a permanent tension between their daily experiences and their expectations of life and their self-image. They are unable and unwilling to connect with their life as it is, constantly yearning for the end. For example, having grown very old, they have lost all their familiar contacts. Others feel alone, suffer emotionally and socially, lose their self-esteem because they are no longer important, or lose their ability to express themselves through writing, public speech, painting and making music. Their days are empty and full of boredom. They consider themselves of no use to society and a burden to their environment. They are physically and mentally tired and feel aversion to and fear being dependent. They judge such a life below their dignity and think that their environment, too, regards them as being of no

⁹ Danuta Mendelson, Voluntary Assisted Dying Legislation in Victoria: What Can We Learn from the Netherlands Experience?, *Journal of Law and Medicine* 25 (2017), 30-45; Oratovska, *Factors* (footn 7); *Annual Report Regionale toetsingscommissies euthanasie* 2016, <https://www.euthanasiecommissie.nl/uitspraken/jaarverslagen/2016/april/12/jaarverslag-2016> (accessed February 6 2019); Sander van Walsum, Hoe is de euthanasiewet eraan toe?, *De Volkskrant* October 30 2017; Els van Wijngaarden, Anne Goossensen and Carlo Leget, The social-political challenges behind the wish to die in older people who consider their lives to be completed and no longer worth living, *Journal of European Policy* 28,4 (Oct 2017), 419-429; Steve Doughty, Don't make our mistake: As assisted suicide bill goes to Lords, Dutch watchdog who once backed euthanasia warns UK of “slippery slope” to mass deaths, *The Daily Mail* July 2014, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2686711/Dont-make-mistake-As-assisted-suicide-bill-goes-Lords-Dutch-regulator-backed-euthanasia-warns-Britain-leads-mass-killing.html> (accessed February 6 2019).

further value.¹⁰ Vink, a philosopher and end-of-life counsellor, warns for a one-sidedly negative image of those involved. CL is also about people who experience their lives as beautiful and fulfilled. They have done and seen what they wanted, and feel no need for more. However, now they prefer to end this nice life with dignity before the bad days come. Afraid of physical and mental decline, they take their fate into their own hands.¹¹ This is confirmed by research showing no relation between depression and CL.¹² Many made their choice through deliberate and rational consideration. Those who require CL, however, are predominantly highly educated people who have often held esteemed positions in science, politics, art or other elite sectors of society. As a result, their self-image is strongly determined by their achievements and by the self-fulfillment that characterizes their lives. Decay or even the fear of decay collides with their self-identities.¹³

How do we explain the pioneering role of the Netherlands in themes of public morality like CL? I suggest five factors.¹⁴

2.1 Regulation

The Dutch level of public regulation is above average. During the rule of Napoleon, the modern, bureaucratic and standardized French legislation was imposed. Since then, the ambition to manage social life in detail has remained.¹⁵ Even exceptional situations require regulation. For example, drugs and prostitution exist everywhere and to a certain extent are tolerated, but the Netherlands has adjusted its legislation to organize such tolerance. The reverse effect is a moral habituation whereby what is outside the rule becomes conceived as acceptable under conditions. All societies pick their way

¹⁰ Els van Wijngaarden, *Ready to give up on life. A study into the lived experiences of older people who consider their lives to be completed and no longer worth living*, Amsterdam 2016.

¹¹ Ton Vink, The wisdom of being ready, without necessarily giving up, <https://ethicsofcare.org/wisdom-ready-without-necessarily-giving/> (accessed February 6 2019).

¹² Els van Wijngaarden, Carlo Leget, Anne Goossensen, Ready to give up on life. The lived experience of elderly people who feel life is completed and no longer worth living, *Social Science & Medicine* 138 (August 2015), 257-264.

¹³ P. Schnabel a. o., *Voltooid leven. Over hulp bij zelfdoding aan mensen die hun leven voltooid achten*. Adviescommissie voltooid leven, Den Haag 2016, 113.152.

¹⁴ Oratovska, Factors (footn 7), 13.

¹⁵ M. J. van der Burg, *Nederland onder Franse invloed. Cultuurtransfer en staatsvorming in de napoleontische tijd, 1799-1813*. Dissertation University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam 2007, 242.

through dilemmas with regard to the border between life and death, but the Netherlands has created legislation, resulting in an accelerated change in public morals, an increase in numbers and the uncovering of ever more exceptional categories that demand regulation.

2.2 Christian past

The Dutch have an exceptional quarrel with their Christian past, resulting in a more violent break with Christian public morality than in many other countries. A major cause forms the success of Abraham Kuyper’s neo-Calvinist movement. In the 19th century, Kuyper transformed his dualist and often otherworldly Christian constituency into an influential public movement that ultimately enforced political power for orthodox Christians and legislation that reflected biblical morality.¹⁶ Ahead of his time as an early Hauerwas, he forced liberalism to acknowledge its particularity and tradition-dependency. After Kuyper, Christian political parties have occupied the center of political power for more than a century. In hindsight, this Christian public power appears to have sown resentment among other groups. After World War II, and especially in the 1960s, an overt revolution against this bourgeois Christian morality was instigated. The political party D66, which initiated most of the recent, controversial laws, publicly celebrated its triumphs over the Christian past. For decades the party has followed a well-planned moral agenda. Controversial legislation on same-sex marriage, euthanasia and CL have been consciously and successfully promoted in years when Christian parties did not participate in government.¹⁷

In other countries, Christians displayed a less pronounced confessional public profile and often accommodated to a vaguer public Christianity that

¹⁶ James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, Grand Rapids 2013.

¹⁷ Oratovska, Factors (footn 7), 7.16f; D’66, Vrijheid door zelfbeschikking, <https://d66.nl/familie-van-nu/vrijheid-door-zelfbeschikking/> (accessed February 6 2019); Arie-Jan Korteweg, Dit D’66 duo waakt over de progressieve kroonjuwelen, *De Volkskrant* March 13 2017, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/dit-d66-duo-waakt-over-de-progressieve-kroonjuwelen~b8a8d26b/> (accessed February 6 2019); Remco van Mulligen, D66 heeft antichristelijk imago geheel aan zichzelf te danken, *Trouw* January 8 2013, <https://www.trouw.nl/home/d66-heeft-antichristelijk-imago-geheel-aan-zichzelf-te-danken~abcdcbe0/> (accessed February 6 2019).

did not repel others. As a consequence, dechristianization was less militant and radical there than it was in the Netherlands.¹⁸

2.3 Media mobilization

Since the 19th century the Netherlands possesses a strong tradition of social movements capable of influencing the direction of democracy. Others copied Kuyper's strategy, especially his remarkable deployment of the new media of his day. The new majorities of the 1960s did so with the phenomenon of television, which for decades since has been dominated by secular liberals.¹⁹ Combined with the above-mentioned militant resentment these media have probably contributed more than any other factor to a change of public opinion on themes of public morality.²⁰

2.4 Demographics

The specific Dutch context has also colored the demographic reality in a unique way. The current demand for CL originates mainly in the Baby Boomers' generation. They are the largest generation in number and have decisive influence. Their biography coincides to a large extent with the story of aggressive Dutch de-Christianization. They formed the protest generation of the 1960s that deliberately said farewell to the bourgeois Christian public power under which they were raised. In the seventies, they developed into a higher-than-ever-before educated generation of idealists, but then settled in the 1980s and transformed into an enlightened, secular, liberal establishment, embracing the neoliberal values of autonomy, self-determination and individual development. During the 1990s they embodied the growth in prosperity and occupied key positions in society after which they arrived at the (successful) climax of their lives. Subsequently, after 2000, they became the first generation to experience a new stage of the human life cycle, which became

¹⁸ Oratovska, Factors (footn 7), 26; C. W. Maris, *Tolerance. Experiments with Freedom in the Netherlands*, Cham, Switzerland 2018; James C. Kennedy, *A Concise History of the Netherlands*, Cambridge 2017.

¹⁹ Frank Verhoef, De media zijn links, wat nu?, <https://www.dagelijksestandaard.nl/2012/03/de-media-zijn-links-wat-nu/>, March 12 2012 (accessed February 6 2019).

²⁰ Oratovska, Factors (footn 7), 24.

known as the third age, between 55 and 75.²¹ Decline still being far away, they enjoyed the peace, prosperity and good health of a new old age. During this Sabbath of earthly existence, human life seems complete and fulfilled. But now they approach the dangerous fourth age, in which deterioration will be experienced in a more disturbing way than ever before, because of the preceding story of successful self-development. The debate on CL seems born from fear of that fourth stage of life and hopes to avoid any shocking fate that would undermine this narrative of self-fulfillment.

2.5 Physicians

Dutch physicians participate in this narrative of liberal dechristianization. Research has shown that in most countries, physicians’ stance is decisive for medical-ethical discussions. At this point a striking contrast occurs between the Netherlands and almost all other Western countries. Almost everywhere doctors were opposed to euthanasia legislation, while Dutch doctors were supportive. No wonder that the Netherlands is leading the way. At the same time, this factor explains that CL does not conquer legislation easily. We already noticed that the Dutch organization of physicians has spoken out against it, though not for reasons of principle, but because they consider the judgment of a doctor indispensable and fear undermining existing euthanasia law.²²

3. Arguments for and against

My next step consists of a short overview of the main arguments of supporters and opponents of CL.²³ I distinguish three levels in the debate: legal, moral and religious. From a *legal* perspective, opponents see a contradiction to existing euthanasia law. When medical indications will no longer be necessary

²¹ Frits de Lange, *De mythe van het voltooid leven. Over de oude dag van morgen*, Zoetermeer 2006; Frits de Lange, *Loving Later Life. An Ethics of Aging*, (Kindle Edition). Grand Rapids 2015. (Kindle Location 117.655.2427).

²² Oratovska, Factors (footn 7), 9f.19ff; KNMG (Royal Dutch Medical Association), Euthanasia in the Netherlands, <https://www.knmg.nl/actualiteit-opinie/nieuws/nieuwsbericht/euthanasia-in-the-netherlands.htm>, August 16 2017 (accessed February 6 2019).

²³ Tineke Noort, *De ouderdom onder ogen. Een onderzoek naar bronnen van troost bij het ouder worden in het licht van het voltooid leven-debat*. Masterthesis Theological University Kampen 2017, 21–27.

for CL, euthanasia legislation itself would become redundant. They fear the extended application and even abuse of the criteria. Advocates of a new law, on the contrary, emphasize its necessity precisely because many people want to end their lives for reasons other than the suffering to which the euthanasia law refers. Incorporating their circumstances into the euthanasia law would unjustifiably medicalize them.²⁴

When it comes to *morality*, advocates refer to generally accepted values. We should have compassion with people who suffer from life. Human dignity is damaged in conditions of humiliating dependency and should be respected. People deserve reassurance and peace of mind, that they will be allowed to die would a possible time of decay, to which they now anxiously look forward, come indeed. We must also do justice to the autonomy of the individual. Everyone has a say over their own life, and this should not be restricted by external bodies such as governments, laws, families or churches. That would presuppose a limitation of our autonomy because of a presumed *prima facie* duty to live. But no such duty exists.²⁵

Opponents mainly follow two tracks. In the first place, they deconstruct the concept of CL and the desire to end life. No objective criterion exists to declare a life completed; it is a merely subjective construction. Someone only thinks that his life is completed. Besides, the wish to die is in fact not the pretended rational calculation, but the result of a series of painful emotions and experiences: fear, loneliness, a sense of unworthiness and senselessness, the experience that the elderly no longer count. Therefore, the answer is not to

²⁴ Schnabel, Voltooid (footn 12), 198.215ff; *Overwegingen artsenfederatie KNMG bij 'Kabinetsreactie en visie Voltooid Leven*, 2017, <https://www.knmg.nl/actualiteit-opinie/nieuws/nieuwsbericht/knmg-voltooid-leven-wens-invoelbaar-maar-regeling-onwenselijk.htm> (accessed February 6 2019).

²⁵ Burgerinitiatief voltooid leven, *Uit vrije wil*, <http://www.uitvrijewil.nu/index.php?id=1000> (accessed February 6 2019); <https://www.laatstewil.nu/> (Accessed February 6 2019); NVVE, *Routewijzer naar verandering. Bouwstenen voor nieuwe wetgeving*, Amsterdam z. j., <https://www.nvve.nl/files/3913/9324/9247/Routewijzer.pdf> (accessed February 6 2019), 13f; H. M. Kuitert, *Suicide, wat is er tegen? Zelfdoding in moreel perspectief*, Baarn, 1994; Doeke Post, *Dying: I'll Do It My Way. Issues, Insights and Ideas for Managing Death*. Lower Plenty, Vic 2016. Lawrence J. Nelson, Erick Ramirez, Can suicide in the elderly be rational, in: Robert E. McCue, Meera Balasubramianam, *Rational Suicide in the Elderly. Clinical, Ethical and Sociocultural Aspects*, Springer Switzerland 2017, 1–22; Els van Wijngaarden, Carlo J. W. Leget and Anne Goossensen, Till Death do us part. The Lived Experience of an Elderly Couple Who Chose to End their Lives by Spousal Self-euthanasia, *The Gerontologist*, 56,6 (2015), 1062–1071, 1066f.1069f.

comply with this seemingly rational wish but to address the deeper, underlying problems. Only more personal care and a more inclusive society form an adequate response. In the second place, opponents often rely on a care ethical and communitarian paradigm. They uncover the hidden value shift behind the plea for CL. Where the euthanasia law builds on compassion with the suffering, for CL in the end individual autonomy *is* decisive. As a side effect this shift returns to the euthanasia law itself, secretly changing its underlying value of compassion into the value of individual autonomy. The logic of the market in health care and the language of individual rights frame both euthanasia and CL as products for which the legislator should create facilities and that the physician should deliver to the autonomous, paying client.²⁶

Opponents emphasize an alternative anthropology, which treats people as utterly dependent from their birth and in need of their surrounding communities. No individual development is possible without interaction with others. Vulnerability and suffering do not bestow less value on humans but, contrarily, characterize the human condition at heart. Human dignity, therefore, is implied in human existence as such and not related to the exercise of autonomy or specific qualities of life.²⁷

Behind these legal and moral considerations religious and philosophical debates linger. In 2018 the Dutch Council of Churches edited a brochure with a contribution of the catholic public theologian Erik Borgman, accentuating that life is God’s gift and that for the God of life no stage of life is of

²⁶ Schnabel, *Voltooid* (footn 12), 198.209; Mendelson, Voluntary, 4; Brecht Molenaar, Nine misunderstandings regarding “completed life”, November 3 2017, <https://ethicsofcare.org/nine-misunderstandings-regarding-completed-life/> (accessed February 6 2019); Frits de Lange, When is a life completed?, <https://ethicsofcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Artikel-Frits-de-Lange-Completed-life-essay.pdf> (accessed February 6 2019); Ton Vink, Self-euthanasia, a good death & end-of-life autonomy, <http://www.ninewells.nl/resources/WCRT-A%27dam-2016Selfeuthanasia.pdf> (accessed February 6 2019); Ton Vink. Self-Euthanasia, the Dutch Experience: In Search for the Meaning of a Good Death or Eu Thanatos, *Bioethics* 30,9 (2016), 681–88; Nienke Nieuwenhuizen, Conflict van plichten, in: Marinus van den Berg a. o., *Nu ik oud word*. Bezinning 55 Raad van Kerken, Amersfoort 2018, 34-37.

²⁷ Van Wijngaarden a. o., The social–political challenges (footn 9); Els van Wijngaarden, Carlo Leget and Anne Goossensen. Disconnectedness from the Here-And-Now. A Phenomenological Perspective As a Counteract on the Medicalisation of Death Wishes in Elderly People. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy. A European Journal* 19, 2 (2016): 265-73; Teun-Jan Tabak, Kwetsbaarheid als waarde. Geestelijk verzorgers over pastoraat aan einde van het leven, in: Van den Berg, *Nu ik oud word* (footn 25), 9-11.

lesser value.²⁸ Being done with life, in the sense that we are better off dead, is impossible. The chairman of the largest Protestant church added a reference to psalm 31 where David, suffering and tired of life, confesses his times to be in God's hand.²⁹ However, these remain unilateral testimonies from the side of the church, without answers from the other side. They are not received as contributions in the public debate itself.

4. Christian contributions

This leads us to the various ways Christians try to participate in the debate on CL. I select three exemplary routes that I characterize as political, care-ethical and narrative.

4.1 Political

Most Christian contributions reflect a political approach. In private and among themselves, many Christians have biblical or ecclesiastical reasons for opposing the termination of life, but in public debate they seek strength in arguments that are as much as possible generally shared and they look for allies who indeed share these. Thus the conviction that life is a gift of God and should therefore be protected, takes on a public form through emphasizing that a death wish is unnatural and therefore must indicate a deeper problem. Christians then often shift public debate from a direct controversy about CL to a discussion about improving care and revaluation of old age. They join the doctors' organization and government advisory committee, which oppose new legislation because of the existing euthanasia law and the risk of an overly wide application of the criteria. Some parts of the above-mentioned publication of the Dutch council of churches reflect this approach, but especially the two Christian political parties that currently form an intriguing coalition government with two secular, liberal parties do so. These parties have succeeded in delaying the direct controversy on CL and first join efforts with their opponents in advocating for a worthy way of aging. Before any end of

²⁸ Erik Borgmann, *Alles is geschapen om te bestaan. Omgaan met de laatste levensfase vanuit Bijbels perspectief*, in: Van den Berg, *Nu ik oud word* (footn 25), 14–17.

²⁹ René de Reuver, in: Maaïke van Houten, *Wat zegt de bijbel over voltooid leven?*, *Trouw* February 5 2018, <https://www.trouw.nl/religie-en-filosofie/wat-zegt-de-bijbel-over-voltooid-leven-~a322ae36/> (accessed February 6 2019).

life counselors should enter the stage, we had better first train life coaches who even provide spiritual care to elderly. Turning the attention from quarreling about the divisive negative to joint efforts towards the shared positive is indeed a remarkable political success for these Christian parties. Yet, everyone knows that the debate about CL will return and legislation will be proposed. As long as Christian parties are not forced to advocate or vote for that, it is not inconceivable that they will cooperate in executing it.³⁰

This strategy connects to two common public-theological positions. First, the classic “doctrine of the two kingdoms” which treats Christians as living in two realms. In the church they directly operate with Christian goals and on biblical ground, while in public life they set lower goals and refer to common arguments, expecting a sufficient level of recognition. In this context, Scholastics have spoken of “nature and grace”, while Abraham Kuyper’s Neocalvinism distinguishes between special and general or common grace.³¹ The second public theological position behind this political strategy is that of an adapted “Christendom”. Despite modern secularization, since the 19th century many Christians have tried to present Christianity as the soul of modern society, though not in a radical explicit form but in the shape of derived shared values and a common direction.³²

4.2 Care-ethical

A second dominant way for Christians to participate in the Dutch public debate about CL is employing an ethics of care and a communitarian approach. Christians here not only join other voices, but in fact are themselves

³⁰ Examples consist of the manifest “Aging in a worthy manner” and a “silver pact” to promote a meaningful place of the elderly between societal partners with various worldviews, both initiated by the *Christenunie*, a Christian political party and under its influence even incorporated in governmental policy, <https://waardigouderworden.christenunie.nl/library/download/urn:uuid:8485efe2-054f-46c1-8c3c-5ca326423dc6/Manifest+waardig+ouder+worden.pdf> (accessed February 6 2019).

³¹ David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms. A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture*. Wheaton, Ill 2010; Ad de Bruijne, “Colony of Heaven”, Abraham Kuyper’s Ecclesiology in the Twenty-First Century, *Journal for Markets and Morality* 17,2 (2014), 445–490.

³² B. C. Labuschagne (ed.), *Religie als bron van sociale cohesie in de democratische rechtsstaat? Godsdienst, overhead en civiele religie in een post-geseculariseerde samenleving*, Leiden 2004; Ad de Bruijne, *Levend in Leviatan. Een onderzoek naar de theorie over “christendom” in de politieke theologie van Oliver O’Donvan*, Kampen 2006.

the main representatives of these approaches. Building on Ricoeur and Taylor they accentuate the passive, receptive, bodily and suffering character of human life and human dignity, thereby contradicting the liberal narrative of rational individual autonomy. They mobilize Tronto's care-ethical insight that people exist in an ecology of interdependence. They are part of a network of mutual care ethical relationships in which all share one life instead of having each an individual life project. This leads to an inherent moral calling for mutual solidarity and communal life, also between the various generations. Additionally, they advocate for practical reforms, such as experimental housing projects in which students and elderly live together or disabled and demented people meet young children and a resting shopping public in their own daily context. The state should not restrict itself to facilitating everyone's individual autonomy, but protect its vulnerable citizens and promote the shared goods of mutual solidarity and care.³³ This approach, too, can be understood from two influential public-theological positions. Different from the former strategy it is more antithetical and positions itself in the particularity of communities instead of choosing a universalizing stance. In accordance with that it contradicts the rule of Enlightenment values and endeavors to embody alternative values of vulnerability and community. This reminds us of postliberal public theologies, like that of Stanley Hauerwas. Unlike in his work, however, here no explicit connection occurs to the Christian story and to the church as an alternative community. Instead, existing paradigms are used as vehicles for the Christian contribution. That reminds us of an aspect of Barth's public theology. Care ethics and communitarianism could be seen as the way God is working today in the civil sphere. Joining these movements could then be the "Gebot der Stunde".³⁴

4.3 Narrative

A third approach I call the narrative. The Dutch theological ethicist Frits de Lange engages the debate on CL by offering a narrative theological hermeneu-

³³ Joris Vercammen, Voorwoord, in: Van den Berg, *Nu ik oud word* (footn 25), 5; Frans Vosman, Dying from a care ethical perspective, <https://ethicsofcare.org/dying-care-ethical-perspective/> (Accessed February 6 2019).

³⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas*, Nashville 2011; Paul Silas Peterson, *The Early Karl Barth. Historical Contexts and Intellectual Formation, 1905–1935*. Beiträge Zur Historischen Theologie, 184. Tübingen 2018, 128.

tics of late modern culture. He recognizes the concept of “completed life” as a caricature of Christian eschatology. At its background stands the 19th century romantic ideal of an individual that fulfills itself through a life cycle. One’s own life counts as the capital that should be invested and developed into flourishing along a self-directed life path. In the third age (which lasts till the age of 75), this course of self-development has been completed. Against this background, the construct of a “completed life” became possible.

With the help of the German theologian Friedrich Marquardt, De Lange unmasks that ideal as an illusion. In itself our life will never be more than an incomplete fragment. Death’s untimely arrival comes before our goals and destination have been reached. Death disrupts life cruelly. Man cannot complete his own life. Only God can, by his eschatological acts that trump death. This traditional, age-old Christian conviction has been abandoned in late modernity. Yet, De Lange uncovers a narrative relationship between the late modern concept of CL and this preceding Christian tradition. Only the latter made the former possible. The concept of CL is utterly dependent on the Christian tradition. Despite breaking away from that, late modernity has not really untied this relationship. However, where former generations expected God to complete their lives through death, our generation has taken up this ambition as their own project. Therefore, De Lange sharply and precisely characterizes the idea of a personal, completed life as our new secularized eschatology.³⁵ Behind De Lange we discover some prominent strands of public theology. With Hauerwas he emphasizes the narrative character of human life, while his life-long dialogue with Bonhoeffer has made him sensitive to the double face of secular modernity, in which some Christian heritage has remained active below the surface.³⁶ However, at that point the political theology of Oliver O’Donovan proves even more fruitful.

5. A proposal

This brings me to my own considerations about a Christian public response to the debate on CL.

³⁵ Frits de Lange, When is a life completed? (footn 25).

³⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Ilse Tödt, *Ethik*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, 6. München 1992, 93–124.

In his political theology, O'Donovan developed an ingenious theological narrative for phenomena within late modern society.³⁷ God is underway to the destination for which he created our world and ourselves. Our moral responsibility is to know the world, in its God-given order in Christ, with love, and then to respond to that world with actions that correspond to God's purposes, both for the world and for ourselves. However, this responsibility is not timeless and general, but tied to the very moment in history where we find ourselves. Under God's providence that moment of action has been given to us. For Western Christians, this means that our public responsibility is determined by the particular context of what is often referred to as post-Christendom. Unlike others, O'Donovan does not conceive of that phenomenon as just leaving behind the previous Christian era and neither simplistically approaches our time as just a repetition of the idealized days of the Early Church. The distinguishing feature of our post-Christendom context is that it has once been shaped by the Christ event and now inevitably remains dependent on it. During a long history, the Christ event first caused the identity of the church, which in turn transformed the character of society. O'Donovan does not consider such a Christian society an earthly form of God's kingdom, but in an Augustinian manner he treats her as an indirect reflection of the new age of Christ's Kingdom in the domain of the present age of the saeculum. According to O'Donovan, the fruits of this transformed earthly society have been harvested especially in the early modern period after the Reformation. Our revolutionary late modern world has inherited these fruits, but at the same time lost connection to the formative realities of the Christ event and the church. This means that it no longer understands the real character of these fruits and tends to distort them, ending up with dilemmas and stalemates for which she seeks solutions without really understanding the realities at stake. Only a renewed understanding from the perspective of the formative but forgotten Christian narrative would provide hope for satisfactory action.³⁸

One of O'Donovan's examples concerns late modernity's high esteem for the moral value of compassion. This originates from Jesus' sufferings and has shaped the church into a suffering community that is willing to share the

³⁷ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations. Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*. Cambridge 1999; De Bruijne, *Levend* (footn 31); Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time. Ethics As Theology 1*. Grand Rapids, Mi. 2013.

³⁸ O'Donovan, *Desire* (footn 36), 271-284.

needs of the vulnerable. However, alienated from Christ, late modern society sees no more sense in human suffering. As a result, the value of compassion becomes problematic and changes in character. It now becomes an emotion at arms-length that ultimately helps the suffering neighbor only from a distance. This lies behind the late modern paradox where helping one’s neighbor to die has come to count as a form of compassion, as can be seen in the respective debates on euthanasia and CL. Both can be clarified from the angle of the Christian narrative. De Lange’s analysis moves along comparable lines and could in fact be used as a further refinement of O’Donovan’s basic paradigm. The human construct of a completed life arises where God’s eschatological destiny was forgotten and yet the imaginaries persist that were once derived from that very narrative.

Rooted in the very narrative that unrecognizedly influences our society, Christians are pre-eminently prepared for the service of clarification. We can be expected to understand the moral stalemates and challenges of our society more than others. Consequently, that hermeneutical insight should help us in finding directions and proposing concrete steps. At the same time, our interpretation contains an invitation to others to engage in a public debate. That contribution differs from a missionary call or a normative command, which would require others to respond with either faith or obedience. But neither does this contribution resemble the proposal of an anonymous, pragmatic consensus in which the Christian narrative remains concealed, or at most tacitly presupposed or translated to more general categories. All moral action requires an interpretation of the reality in which we have to act. Christians present their unique interpretation of the shared reality of a post-Christendom world in the expectation that others could at least recognize something of it and experience a hint of plausibility.

Without denying the worldly character of the public debates in this age, Christians will offer a genuine Christian testimony, since for the sake of public debate the Christian narrative will be publicly employed. We can understand why O’Donovan considers political theology to possess promising apologetic potential especially for late modern public life.

Following this track, as explored by O’Donovan and De Lange, I mention two further aspects of the debate on CL where public theology could offer a service of clarification: repressed guilt and conquering death.

5.1 Repressed guilt

First the Christian narrative uncovers a repressed sense of guilt and a desire for external justification in this debate. The philosopher and end-of-life counselor Vink has every reason to advocate self-euthanasia as the appropriate way of dying for autonomous individuals.³⁹ He calls those who prefer this act to be carried out by a doctor or counsellor inconsistent with the principle of self-determination. They pass on to others a responsibility that is their own. Could this indicate a repressed feeling of guilt which they wish to divert to others? After all, contrary to late-modern thought, being created by God indeed implies a calling or duty to live. Suppressing this calling breeds guilt.

Perhaps equally telling are the persistent efforts to get legal approval for CL. Only a minority of the population considers CL seriously, while Vink's actual practice shows self-euthanasia to be possible even without such a law. Could it be that our fellow citizens, despite their secularity, are not free from the Christian story of responsibility, guilt, shame and justification? Estranged from God's justification by grace they now seek a secular justification through the law.

5.2 Conquering death

Secondly, the Christian story clarifies the late modern attitude to death. Christians usually judge the prevailing concept of autonomy negatively. Swaabs statement from the beginning of this article sounds like shocking arrogance: man pretends to rule over death. However, exactly there one could hear the echo of the biblical message that all powers are subject to man and that even death has been conquered. Notably, it was the Western world that witnessed a radical change in the position of man in reality. No longer anxiously and helplessly dominated by surrounding forces of nature, man has become a ruler who fights disease and takes the course of development into his own hands.⁴⁰ The fear of death, which according to Hebrews 2 characterizes the human condition, turned into trusting courage. With Paul Christians could even desire to die (Philippians 1). Like Paul and the patriarchs, Christians dare conclude that they have completed their course and are satisfied with life (2 Timothy 4).

³⁹ Vink, Self-euthanasia; Boudewijn E. Chabot, Arnold Goedhart, A survey of self-directed dying attended by proxies in the Dutch population, *Social Science & Medicine* 68 (2009) 1745–1751.

⁴⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Ma. 2007, 25–89.

Death is no longer just an enemy but can become a marker that your life-path in God’s service has been completed.

However, following Hebrews 2, for Christians, this victorious attitude to death exists only in Christ. Precisely that connection disappeared from late modern culture. The result we see in fellow citizens who have unconsciously inherited this Christian attitude but are now left to themselves. They end up with insoluble dilemmas and ultimately new versions of stoicism. They close their eyes to the fact that apart from Christ death will be a strong enemy (1 Corinthians 15). Not the ultimate relief of pain or the soft blanket of oblivion but the utter form of suffering. Choosing death in order to avoid suffering is a self-deceptive paradox, because death forms the climax of suffering. Without Christ it will never be an act of autonomy but a defeat against one stronger than we are. Death does not mark the completion of your life but instead fixes your story as unfinished. Even what you experienced as more or less completed yet breaks into pieces. Voluntary death only makes sense when following Jesus who took his cross upon himself. Isolated from that relationship, it signals our post-christian alienation from Christ, that seduces us to present ourselves as secular Christs.

5.3 Critique of Christian strategies

This narrative analysis makes me critical of some aspects of the Christian responses to CL that I characterized as political and care-ethical. It is not true that the wish to end a life considered completed must always have underlying causes like inadequate care, marginalization of old age and a lack of spiritual guidance. Of course, for the many cases where this is indeed true, building Christian public efforts on it is apt. And the current success of that Christian strategy in the Netherlands can be valued positively from an Augustinian perspective as finding overlapping lesser goods in which the love of the city of God and the love of the city of man can temporarily join.⁴¹ But Christians should be aware that explaining away other motives comes down to exploiting the power of speech and not doing justice to the real needs of fellow-citizens. The existence of other motives is confirmed not only by empirical research, but also by the preceding analysis of our late modern context from the perspective of the Christian narrative. Therefore, this narrative should not

⁴¹ Aurelius Augustinus, *De Civitate Dei*, XV,4. XVII,54.

be withheld or postponed but form the explicit frame for all Christian debate and action.

A comparable caution is needed when Christians join efforts with those who object against CL because they consider current euthanasia law to be sufficient. Of course the political context at a certain moment can demand such an occasional covenant. But it is precisely the euthanasia law that has profoundly changed public morality in these matters. Such a temporary political covenant will therefore only be sincere in the context of bringing up explicitly the Christian narrative in public debate.

This political response is often too naïve in the expectation of consensus. The two kingdoms model from the Reformation or the neo-Calvinistic distinction between general and special grace is not automatically suited to our post-Christendom world. Both rely on timeless natural reason and tend to overlook the contingent and providential character of fragments of earthly peace. In a post-Christendom world, this strategy easily becomes secularized, as it satisfies the demand of John Rawls and other liberal theorists that in public debate only common human reasoning is allowed. A missionary reality and post-Christendom world cannot do without the overt Christian narrative. And since we have learned from post-liberal philosophies and theologies that rationality is always embedded in tradition and community⁴², we should acknowledge that such a narrative framework not only displays the fundamental public collision but also increases the chance of moments of consensus. More adequate than the static models of two kingdoms or of common and special grace is Augustine's concept of two opposing cities that yet coexist in a mixed reality.

This criticism also affects the covenant of many Christians with an ethics of care, which does not operate from the explicit Christian story, easily rendering the plea for solidarity idealistic. Moreover, care ethics builds on a one-sided anthropology of vulnerability and suffering and is therefore fundamentally critical of modern autonomy. When we recognize more of the Christian story, even in secular modernity, a nuanced valuation of autonomy and more consensus and cooperation would be fitting.

One last aspect concerns the ambition to continue and improve my own neocalvinist tradition for today's public challenges. O'Donovan is helpful

⁴² Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics. The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness*. Chichester 2010.

for reinforcing some Augustinian foundations that are present in Kuyper but have been neglected by his heirs. However, there is a risk that our use of the Christian narrative becomes a reality that is merely verbal. Therefore, I also keep narrative theologians such as Hauerwas and his school on my radar. They emphasize that the Christian story is embodied in the Christian church and its liturgy. Therefore Hauerwas is right in stating that the primary public significance of the Christian narrative lies in the exemplary existence of the church.⁴³ Connected to CL this implies that the primary question is not how Christians could influence society or prevent a bad law but how the Christian community itself deals with illness, old age, death and the modern ideal of self-fulfillment. We must admit that Christians often perform not only the Christian narrative but also the late modern story. In fact, neo-Calvinism, with its unguarded propagation of the cultural mandate, unintentionally strengthened this story. And my advisory practice as an ethicist teaches me that Christians are equally afraid of decay, old age, and dependence. They too sometimes experience vulnerability as being unworthy, are tired and suffer from life. They too have requested termination of life.

Growing in the embodiment of the Christ's story is therefore urgent, both in our attitudes inside the church and in our dealings with others. Sometimes I have the intuition that we as Western Christians are called today to a much more radical break with the late modern quest for self-development. Being content with less social status, a less high flying career, a less demanding job, less scientific fame, less success in developing our potential and ambitions, we could enter into friendships with so many around us who will be candidates for requiring termination of life in the coming years. Of course, we should be aware of the danger of idealism. One of the most important criticisms of Hauerwas is the question whether the church that he writes about really exists. We will not change the church, let alone society. But we can start personally, or as group of friends, or as part of the Christian community to put something of this friendship into practice. Perhaps God will bless such mustard seeds with the tree of improved public morality or an extended after-effect of the Christian tradition. But if not, he still sows his kingdom through such small acts. That kingdom progresses through the paradox of the cross.

⁴³ Stanley Hauerwas and William H Willimon. *Resident Aliens. Life in the Christian Colony : A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something Is Wrong*. Expanded 25th Anniversary ed. Nashville 2014.

What has been done in secret will ultimately prove itself as the ultimate public reality.

Prof. dr. Ad de Bruijne
althdebruijne@tukampen.nl

Abstract

After the 2002 Dutch bill on euthanasia and assisted suicide, many now advocate the legalization of assisted dying for those who believe that their life is complete or no longer meaningful. The article explores some of the factors that could explain the pioneering role of the Netherlands in this area. It identifies the legal, moral and religious dimensions involved in the ongoing debate. In terms of the public responses of Christians a spectrum of conceptions is unfolding reaching from the employment of general reason, building on a two kingdom doctrine or a Kuyperian distinction between common grace and special grace, over postliberal theologies to the use of narrative methods to deconstruct the concept of a completed life, drawing on Stanley Hauerwas and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The article suggests this latter approach could be enhanced by Oliver O'Donovan's political theology, who considers Christian public responsibility to be specifically determined by the conditions of the contemporary post-Christendom context. The author concludes that since the kingdom of God progresses through the paradox of the cross, small acts of friendship toward those seeking to die will ultimately prove to be the ultimate public reality.