



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on February 14, 2014

## Belgian Parliament Passes Law Permitting Euthanasia for Children

Belgium's Chamber of Representatives voted on February 13 to pass a bill allowing children under 18 to request euthanasia with parental consent. The vote was 86 in favor, 44 opposed, and 12 abstaining. A man in the public gallery of parliament shouted "murderers" in French when the vote was passed, Reuters news agency reported.



Belgium's Senate passed the law in December by a vote of 50-17, with four senators not voting.

The new law is Europe's most permissive law on euthanasia, with the Netherlands, Belgium's northern neighbor, allowing euthanasia for children over the age of 12, providing there is parental consent. Belgium's new law states that children of any age who decide to end their own lives may be put to death, but must possess "discernment" and must be evaluated by psychologists who must certify that they understand the severity of their decision.

Sonja Becq, a Christian Democratic and Flemish Party representative, denounced the law, saying modern science is capable of relieving pain in terminally ill children until their illnesses lead to their ultimate end. "We cannot accept that euthanasia be presented as a 'happy ending,' " she was quoted by AP, noting that Belgium sets legal limits on who can legally buy cigarettes and alcohol — so why not restrict euthanasia?

"Can you tell me what a 'state of discernment' means?" Becq also asked.

On January 31, a group of 38 Belgian pediatricians (whose numbers later increased to 160) issued a statement denouncing the bill. The statement addressed the impracticality of its "discernment" requirement, noting: "According to the current draft law, the ability of the minor to discern is a condition of admissibility of the request for euthanasia. *However, in practice, there is no objective method for determining whether a child is gifted with the ability of discernment and judgment.* So this is actually largely subjective and subject to other influences.... Because there is no objective measure of the ability of discernment [of] children, we believe that the issue deserves further consideration." (Emphasis in original.)

The law states that a child would have to be terminally ill, face "unbearable physical suffering," and make repeated requests to die before euthanasia is considered. The pediatricians' statement cited above also addressed the issue of suffering, noting: "we are now able to fully control the physical pain, choking, or anxiety as they approach death. The palliative care teams for children are perfectly capable of recognized pain relief, both in hospital and at home."

Before the euthanasia law can be implemented, Belgium's monarch, King Philippe, must perform the mostly ceremonial job of ratifying it with his signature. The king, who, like most Belgians, is Catholic, is not expected to follow in the footsteps of his uncle Boudouin I, who refused to sign a bill passed by



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parliament in 1990 that legalized abortion during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

During the time that the abortion bill was being considered, Belgium's Catholic bishops issued a statement to their flock that anyone who cooperated "effectively and directly" in the procurement of abortions was "excluding themselves from the ecclesiastical community." Faced with a constitutional as well as moral crisis, Boudouin asked Prime Minister Wilfried Martens to find a solution. The parliament declared King Baudouin unfit to fulfill his constitutional duties as monarch for one day, while government ministers signed the bill in his place, and then proceeded to reinstate the king after the abortion law had come into effect.

Belgian religious groups also publicly opposed the new euthanasia law. Brussels' Catholic Archbishop Andre-Joseph Leonard held a prayer vigil last week, during which he asked why the government would allow a child to make an adult decision. "The law says adolescents cannot make important decisions on economic or emotional issues, but suddenly they've become able to decide that someone should make them die," said Leonard.

Despite the fact that 58 percent of Belgians indicate that they are at least nominally Catholic, one survey found that 75 percent of Belgians were in favor of extending the euthanasia law to children. However, since other surveys have indicated that only five percent of Belgian Catholics attend Mass every Sunday, it is apparent most pay little attention to their church's teaching.

The Catholic Church's condemnation of euthanasia applies to all human beings, not just children. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "Whatever its motives and means, direct euthanasia consists in putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick, or dying persons. It is morally unacceptable."

Belgians are represented in smaller number by other Christian denominations, including the Anglican Communion and Orthodoxy, which vary in their positions on euthanasia, with mainstream denominations taking a more liberal approach and evangelical and Orthodox Christians usually opposing the practice.

Dr. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury and spiritual leader of Anglican churches, stated in an address to the Church of England General Synod on February 6, 2012, that while Christians would not force dying people to "cling to life at all costs, every life in every imaginable situation is infinitely precious in the sight of God."

"To say that there are certain conditions in which life is now legally declared to be not worth living is a major shift in the moral and spiritual atmosphere."

Dr. Williams added: "What you are faced with here is a legal outcome in which protection is diminished not only for vulnerable individuals but also for the medical profession."

At the synod, the Anglican Bishop of Carlisle, the Rt. Rev. James Newcome, warned against a tendency to regard "life as disposable, a commodity like any other in our consumer driven society to be thrown away when it has supposedly gone wrong."

Newcome added: "A truly compassionate society will invest in high quality palliative care rather than lethal doses of poison — we are not the same as our animals."

However the growing number of Muslims in Belgium has made Islam the second largest religion practiced in Belgium, making up about six percent of the population. An essay posted on StudyMode about Islamic Teaching on Euthanasia noted:

In an Islamic perspective life in all aspects belongs to Allah. Direct/active euthanasia and assisted



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suicide both remove the sacredness of life and take the power of the moment of death from Allah, which defies the Shari'ah as seen in the Qur'an.

A study compiled by the BBC on the ethics of euthanasia and suicide in Islam, offered this summary:

Muslims are against euthanasia. They believe that all human life is sacred because it is given by Allah, and that Allah chooses how long each person will live. Human beings should not interfere in this.

Since the majority of Belgians are led by spiritual leaders who have taught against euthanasia, it is evident the professed religious affiliations of Belgians (like many people in other European countries and in the United States) are not strong enough to translate into political action that reflects their professed beliefs.

It can be concluded, therefore, that social ills like abortion and euthanasia have their origins in a rejection of faith.



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