

Good Morning,

I am Robert Ince, and I am president of the world's oldest international interfaith organisation, the International Association for Religious Freedom. I was also the Convenor of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches and I remain a member of their governing body.

And although I am a Director of the campaign group, My Death, My Decision, I wish to speak to you today as a religious leader who believes that the right thing to do is to change the law.

In my work president, I meet religious leaders from various denominations of the Abrahamic faiths, so that is Christianity, Judaism and Islam, as well as leaders from the Eastern Religions, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and Shintos.

These religions, of course, have very different spiritual practices and different ways of expressing their concept of their God, but the one thing all these religions have in common is a caring attitude. Compassion, love, peace and a desire for justice. I think that it can be summed up in what theologians call the Golden Rule. To paraphrase Jesus, 'Treat others as you would wish them to treat you'.

I think, religious leaders constantly wrestle with the dilemmas of how to reconcile apparent contradictions in their sacred texts and how to apply their wisdom to today's evolving social challenges. And so, you have the situation, particularly in the Christian Churches that, despite what the leadership might say, many Christians wholeheartedly support assisted dying.

So, for me, the fundamental questions are 'Does your life belong to God and does that mean that God is the only one who can bring it to a close?' - I don't think so. Of course, there are many perceptions about the relationship between God and humans, but it does seem to me when a doctor saves a life that would otherwise have been brought to a close, then we humans do very much influence when and how people die - and we always have done.

And today, when medical science can keep people alive indefinitely should it choose, there is another question about the desirability of prolonging life for the sake of it. That question was answered for me when I saw Nelson Mandela prevented from dying because doctors

wanted to keep him alive artificially. People need to be allowed to die with dignity and without unnecessary suffering

So, another question might be about life being sacred, and what does that actually mean? Even in scriptural terms, it doesn't mean life can never be brought to an end by human hand. I think it was the Rev Professor Paul Badham who asked 'Why is this supposed to be an argument against assisted dying?'

But ultimately, it comes down to personal conscience. The Christian Church has never based its moral teaching solely on the Bible. For most people of faith, their religion and their sacred texts guide their conscience in matters of how they deal with their fellow humans. I think it is a great shame that many religious people who are against assisted dying will not be open and admit their conscientious objection. For me, compassion, love and the desire to treat those who suffer in a way that I would wish to be treated myself, is at the very heart of religion.

And I think we should remember that if our conscience tells that the caring compassionate thing to do, the right thing to do, is to help people who suffer in this final part of their life's, then it is wrong to do otherwise

Can I also address the issue of restricting any law to those who are terminally ill?

I recall that Lord Neuberger in the Nicklinson case pointed out, those who face many years of suffering may have a much stronger case for being assisted in dying. And does not the experience of the latest decade with so many more countries now legalising this right prove that effective safeguards can be put in place? For me, the idea that restricting the law to the terminally ill, particularly with arbitrary time limits, makes no sense.

I think it is important that have a law that allows all those who incurably suffering to die in a manner and a moment of their own choice.

Thank you very much for listening