



Elderly Facing Death During the Pandemic: The Ethical Dilemma of Hong Kong Christians

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Abstract. Christian faith has a major influence on Hong Kong since the 17th century. Many hospitals and organizations have upheld the spirit of Christian ethics to help those in need, especially for the end-of-life care of the elderlies. In the past two years of the outbreak of pandemic, the medical system established for many years has been facing very big challenges. It is especially difficult for the elderly and their families who are facing death in Hong Kong hospitals. This article examines the concept of a “good death” in Christian faith, in addition, the moral dilemmas older adults and their families face during this time of pandemic. The spiritual and mental needs of patients and families are often sacrificed in the name of public health. The application of Christian ethics from the teachings of Jesus provides inspiration for suffering at the important stage of life in old age, death, and gives us answers to face and heal the pain of death.

Keywords: Good death · Christian ethics · palliative care · pandemics · spiritual care

1 Pandemics, Dying and Medical Treatment of the Hong Kong

Christian ethics has hoped to care for other people based on God’s love for people. Having experienced many plagues in history, the church is often the most important group to stay behind to help the sick and the needy. Throughout the history of the church, Christians have witnessed many human disasters. They have always been responsible for accompanying, healing, and caring for the sick and dying. When the Black Death ravaged Europe in the Middle Ages, everyone fled the unfortunately ill. Christians built hospitals and cared for the dying (Kenny et al., 2021). The Christian spirit of benevolence is manifested in the most vulnerable moments of society and among the needy. Since the colonial time from the 17th century to the present day Hong Kong has undergone tremendous changes in public health. In the early days of Hong Kong as a small port, infectious diseases such as plague and malaria were rampant. At that time, there was a lack of public medical care in Hong Kong. Many missionaries traveled from Western society to Hong Kong for missions. Most of the hospitals in Hong Kong were run by churches (Li, 2012). Therefore, Christianity has a profound influence on Hong Kong. Currently, there are about 1.2 million Christians in Hong Kong, accounting for more than 16% of the population (HKSAR, 2021). A large part of education, medical and social

services in Hong Kong started from the church, with 7 hospitals and 17 clinics. About 110 social welfare organizations, including 100 family centers, and 170 elderly centers and nursing homes, as well as 60 rehabilitation centers and 50 pastoral offices, are under Christian management (HKSAR, 2021). Even for some incurable patients, the church would reach out to accompany them and ensure their care and dignity before they die. Palliative care in Hong Kong and around the world were created and institutionalized by the church, with a focus on the care of their family too. The hospice service started in the Our Lady of Maryknoll Hospital in the 1980s in Hong Kong, and then a total of five Christian hospitals followed (Jockey Club Ode to Peace, 2018). But during the recent coronavirus epidemic, from the end of 2019 to April 2022, more than 6.5 million people died in the world, and 9,267 people died from the illness in Hong Kong, which cause the world to fall into a great fear. Not only the victims of the condition, but also during the period, patients or elderly who admitted and died in the hospital due to other causes will also be greatly affected by the epidemic. The world has also fallen into a new norm of isolation between people, including those on the verge of death, who may also be cut off from their loved ones. Notable in a person's life, death is a very important stage, but many things have to be stopped under the epidemic. Death is not under the control of people in most cases. It is a urgent circumstance, for examples there are sons and daughters from overseas who want to return to Hong Kong to see their parents in critical condition. But they are affected by the epidemic and need to be quarantined, which also hinder their chance to see their parents for "the last time". In fact, there is no greater suffering in this world than experiencing life-and-death. Is there anything more difficult than that of the separation from one's own flesh and blood? In handling patients dying in hospital and receiving hospice care during the pandemic in the past two years, the writer has the opportunity to encounter some of the seriously ill people and their families who face death, and she also has been supervising the work of grief counselling for the students working with these families. For example, Mrs. Cheng was dying with cancer in Hong Kong in the beginning of 2021. It was during the pandemic. Her children could not come to see her for the last time without being quarantine. They have applied for exemption and plan for special route with the vehicle provided by the health department to come to Shatin Hospital to see her for only 15 min. Because that was the maximum time, they could be allowed to see each other without being in "close contact". Unfortunately, after all the considerations, procedures and flight journey, Mrs. Cheng passed away the night before her children landed. In this article, it is hoped to explore the problems faced by people who died in Hong Kong during the two years of the epidemic, and to explore the issue of "good death" in Christian ethics.

2 The Study of "Good Death"

For the concept of "good death", there are different meanings in different religious and philosophical beliefs. People in Chinese culture are generally reluctant and avoid talking about death. There are many taboos about it and many ways in Chinese language in replacement of the word of death. It proves that Chinese people are very negative towards death. However, according to Christian ethics, God created the world and an orderly universe. The endless existence of human beings is the grace of God. Christians

believe that everyone is in one with the spirit of Jesus Christ, and believers have eternal life through Jesus Christ. After death in the kingdom of heaven, we all meet again, with God. Therefore, a person facing the death of loved ones does not have to be too sad, and death is “sleeping in Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). In this view, Christianity is not fearful in talking about death as long as the person is putting their faith in the Lord. We are only foreigners in this world. In the Bible Psalm 39:4–13, there is this passage: “Show me, Lord, my life’s end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Everyone is but a breath, even those who seem secure. “Surely everyone goes around like a mere phantom; in vain they rush about, heaping up wealth without knowing whose it will finally be. “But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you. Save me from all my transgressions; do not make me the scorn of fools. I was silent; I would not open my mouth, for you are the one who has done this. Remove your scourge from me; I am overcome by the blow of your hand. When you rebuke and discipline anyone for their sin, you consume their wealth like a moth—surely everyone is but a breath. “Hear my prayer, Lord, listen to my cry for help; do not be deaf to my weeping. I dwell with you as a foreigner, a stranger, as all my ancestors were. Look away from me, that I may enjoy life again before I depart and am no more.” In the beliefs and ethics of the Christian Church, human life is in the hands of God. It is God’s will and arrangement how we live in this world. According to the theologian Moltmann, human-being mirror the social model of the trinity. It is with their neighbors on earth, they could be able to get to know God and his true love (Phan, 2011). That is to say, Christians’ “good death” emphasizes on the role of companionship, comfort, support, and encouragement in fellowship. This spirit of fellowship brings physical and spiritual comfort and healing to the dying. It is to believe that there is another world beyond this world. There are many descriptions of “Good death” in the Bible.

2.1 Abraham’s Story

“Abraham lived a hundred and seventy-five years. Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age. He was gathered around by his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah near Mamre, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, the field Abraham had bought from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried with his wife Sarah. After Abraham’s death, God blessed his son Isaac, who then lived near Beer Lahai Roi.” (Genesis 25:7–11) “You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age.” (Genesis 15:15) Abraham is the most representative figure in the Bible. He had six sons after having two sons with great difficulty. The Bible describes him as wealthy, with longevity, and well buried by his sons. He is the ancestor of the three religions in the world. His life was continued for future many generations, and many remember him. In Christian ethics, he surely has a good ending of life and is considered to be greatly blessed by God. In the times of the Bible for Jewish, if a deceased was commemorated, mourners would wear sackcloth. They would loosen their hair or cover themselves with dust, and fast with family gatherings. They also cry loudly for their family members, and even hire professional mourners at the funeral to express their mourning for the dead (Spronk, 2004). These gatherings and funerals represent the culture and their connection between generations (Chan & Chow, 2006). For the people

of the Old Testament era, it is great sadness if there is no descendant for a person, to leave a name, to allow the person to be remembered.

2.2 Job's Story

“Or why was I not hidden away in the ground like a stillborn child, like an infant who never saw the light of day? There the wicked cease from turmoil, and there the weary are at rest. Captives also enjoy their ease; they no longer hear the slave driver's shout. The small and the great are there, and the slaves are freed from their owners. Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul, to those who long for death that does not come, who search for it more than for hidden treasure, who are filled with gladness and rejoice when they reach the grave?” (Job 3:16–22).

From this scripture, we can see that in the midst of suffering, Job really felt that death was better than life. He felt extremely depressed. It reminds me of a person I have met. He was tormented by cancer. He had a near-death experience in October 2019. Later, his health improved a little, but he was always in and out of the hospital. He told us that his wish that he could die and get away from this suffering. However, he was in the tortured of pain and many of his organs were in failure for more than six months. He could not eat nor going to the toilet. He finally passed away in a hospital in April 2020 during the epidemic. Not everyone's situation was as Job in the Bible who later recovered from serious illnesses. This is the record about Job's at the end of his life: “After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. And so Job died, an old man and full of years.” (Job 42:16–17). We believe that is another example of having “good death” in Christianity. Especially after so much suffering, Job could have his prosperity, long life and generations of off springs surrounding him (Spronk, 2004).

2.3 Elijah's Story

No one can escape death, but in the ancient time, there was a prophet, Elijah. The account of his death was very special. He was directly raised to heaven by God with chariot, it means this prophet had a very special relationship with God. He was spared from the process of death. He was raised to heaven in glory and his successor, Elisha loved him so, mourned for him and continued his work. I believe this is the kind death that people would seek, to be able to escape from the pain and suffering of death. “As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two. Elisha then picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan.” (2 Kings 2:11–13) From here we can see the special relationship of Elijah with God without having a broken relationship (Spronk, 2004).

From the stories above, the “good death” in Christian ethics seems to include physical, mental, social, and spiritual contentment and peace. It is hoped that there is no long-term pain in the body, and what the heart desires to be satisfied has been achieved. However, spiritually, it also includes settling their relationships with people and God. It

is to hope that the person may have descendants, loved ones and family to be around. Historically, people hope to leave comfortably listening to hymn in their bed in their own home. The clergy have also been responsible for these tasks. For examples, many emperors in ancient Western history hoped to be baptized before they died, so that the sins they committed in the world could be cleaned up at the last moment before they died. So, their relationship with God was repaired. And they could enjoy eternal life in the kingdom of heaven after death. The clergy would also pray and poured oil on them, hoping to bless them and relieve their physical and spiritual pain.

2.4 The “Good Death” in Hong Kong Hospitals

On the other hand, hospitals in Hong Kong aim to provide the most high-quality and dignified services to dying patients and their family. Since the 1980s, public hospitals in Hong Kong have been having improving quality service of palliative care. However, since the outbreak of coronavirus, the medical system has been greatly challenged on top of the demanding amount of work in the medical system. It has been most difficult for the vulnerable groups in society. Compared with other age groups, the elderlies are the most severely affected by the coronavirus in and they have a very high mortality rate. The elderlies themselves are already suffering from many chronic diseases. For example, more than 80% of the deaths in China are in the group of people over 60 years old (Fan & Zhang, 2021). Western humanistic thinking and the concept of self-giving unconditional love come from the spirit of Christ. And this is in respect to every human that they are equal in the image of God. However, in the context of hospital, the competition for resources between admissions may often be relatively different (Lee, 2020). For example, comparing to a child being infected by COVID-19 with an elderly person in the same condition, it is believed that the facilities and manpower of children’s ward is so much better than the elderlies who could only choose to enter through the emergency room during the epidemic in Hong Kong public hospitals. As they are the only facilities which are willing to accept these patients. In Hong Kong, where the population is seriously aging, the resources of the geriatric ward are already tight. Under the pandemic, there are special requirements for the condition would worsen the pressure of the manpower of the geriatric ward. The quality of care for the dying elderly patients has been seriously challenged. It is recommended that we should rethink about the discrimination for resources against elderly people and people facing disabilities (Adam & Clough, 2020). Relatively, some of the elderly people may not have much knowledge for the illness. And their economic environment is relatively poor. Their physical, mental, as well as their spiritual health are in serious crisis in the state of vulnerability. In addition to the basic needs and medical needs of the people who are in critical condition in the hospital, it is very important that their mental and spiritual health is taken care of. Health is broadly defined in scientific medical perspective, psychological perspective and spiritual religious perspective. In the World Health Organization’s definition, health includes a state of physical, mental, and social integrity, however, frequently the spiritual aspects seems to be ignored (World Health Organization, 2006). The risk of anxiety and depression among the elderly is already high. During the epidemic, they are even more likely to feel helpless, lonely, panicked, being discriminated against, being excluded, and having identity crisis due to isolation from their community and family. Elderly and

dying patients may not be able to express and communicate with others for themselves. They must rely on family members and friends to fight for them. However, during the pandemic, the situation is more severe due to the isolation. During the difficult time, they may even have misunderstanding about their own situation. As a result, they are more likely to be exposed to much fear and torment. They could only rely heavily on professionals in hospitals to help (United Nations, 2020). Since the pandemic, hospitals in Hong Kong have been adapting the electronic devices such as mobile phones to allow patients to communicate with their families. Additional manpower is needed in hospitals to allow patients to make video calls with their families. This kind of communication could be the only possible way they are able to keep contact with their own family members. On the other hand, there are many elderly people who do not understand how to use these electronic devices. The communication with their family could be affected even in the most critical moments. As a result, these pressures can lead to a breakdown in family relationships (Louw, 2020). The author has heard a case example, Mr. Fan being affected with Alzheimer's disease at the same time, he was crying to his family over the phone, asking why they didn't come to visit. He thought that something happened to his family, or they had abandoned him. Further, his memory and cognitive abilities have been greatly worsened in the isolation. This really makes things more difficult for the grieving family members and the patients to face the terminal illness. There was another case; an elderly father was dying helplessly in the hospital. He talked on the phone to his daughter hoping that she would not be burdened by his death. He started talking to his daughter about the funeral arrangements, saying he hoped that everything would be simplified and he could be cremated. But as a Chinese with the taboo about death, the daughter felt very upset after hearing it, and then they had an argument. She told her father not to bring up these topics. It was very difficult and sad for them not to be able to discuss these important issues in person and it arose so much misunderstanding and grief. Under the situation of the pandemic, different wards in the hospital maintain various pandemic prevention standards. There were periods of time for complete ban on visiting the patients. Even terminally ill patients are not exempted from this banning from family visits. Restriction could be exempted only when they face near-death situation or they call it imminent dying. The visits of the chaplains, family and friends are prohibited during COVID-19. This is depriving the care of the dying that is absolutely essential for family farewells sacraments (Adam & Clough, 2020). In that situation, the remaining time of the patient may be measured in days or hours. The vital signs of the dying patient may be declining rapidly. They could be unable to communicate in any means. In this way, the dying patient could not grasp the chance to communicate with his family and without expressing his last will before passing away. It may cause great pain and far-reaching impact on both the deceased and their family (Adam & Clough, 2020). In fact, in the early stage of the pandemic, these conditions were even more serious. It was because the public, hospitals and the government had little knowledge of the pandemic. Some dying patients did not even have the chance to see the family for the last time. For some people, the ceremony of funeral and cremation have been canceled or simplified. In some funeral, the person who were infected by coronavirus had to have a closed casket and their loved ones could not see their face to say goodbye in the funerals (Fan & Zhang, 2021).

3 The “Good Death” Teaching from Jesus

Helping the elderly to have “good death” is a slippery and fluid process. The changes of the elderly body and illness development are beyond the control of ordinary people. From the perspective of Christian ethics, how can we solve the ethical dilemma brought by the pandemic? How can we care for friends and family who are about to leave in the world? How may we walk with them through the most difficult times in the life stage? We could not control the length of our lives, but we might be able to deepen the depth of the meaning of our lives. It is to rely on the love of Jesus Christ to face death. It is to know what is important to hold on to according to the Bible and what is to let go. I hope by sharing the following stories from Jesus could give us some inspiration:

3.1 Lazarus’ Story

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.” (Luke 16:19–23) There is plenty of discussions about good death in the Bible. Most of which are related to the blessing of longevity and wealth. But there are different ethical implications in this story by Jesus. An unloving rich man went to hell. And Lazarus, a beggar, lived happily ever after in the arms of his ancestor, Abraham. On the spiritual level of Christian ethics, in addition to being blessed materially in this world, happiness is more about being able to understand the hope of eternal life and establishing a relationship with God.

During the pandemic, we need to help the dying, as well as relatives and friends of dying relatives, to deal with and adjust their emotions and emotions, and to transcend the fear of death in faith. I have learnt an example that a person with faith and acceptance in his terminal condition of his health. He was dying in agony both mentally, physically and without the support spiritually. Leaving so much pain and grief for both himself and the family (Chan & Chow, 2006). On the other hand, I also got to know a person’s mother, with devoted faith in God. She was prepared to face her destiny and she knew and have confident of where she was going in peace.

3.2 Another Lazarus and His Family

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. “Where have you laid him?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. Jesus wept (John 11:33–35).

The above story shows that we need to have an understanding of death and understand the meaning and impact of life and death on human beings. Also, we need to eliminate self-centered habitual thinking as a Christian. Since we might be too fast to ask the persons in grief to not to be sad to accept the loss of their loved ones. Even Jesus knows well that there is eternal life after death. Jesus wept over the death of his friend Lazarus. He understands well that death is sad and negative for humans. And it is not easy for us to accept it even as believers of eternal life (Atkinson et al., 1994).

3.3 Jesus Arranged for His Disciples to Take Care of His Mother Before He Died

When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, “Woman, here is your son, and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (John 19:26–27).

When Jesus was dying on the cross in suffering, He also personally arranged for his disciples to take care of his mother. Especially in difficulty times, Christian faith encourages us to try our best to care for the people around us. It is especially important for the ones who are facing death. The strength of our faith and ethical character of being Christian, in the midst crisis, death and suffering, has always been tested in the history of Christianity. We do not only have faith, hope and love for ourselves, but also bring them to others. Christian became the “guardian angels” for those who need to care for people. For the dying, the author believes that the biggest virus is not only attacking our body, but also our soul. This is the most important part to defend the soul of people in Christian palliative care. (Ronaldson et al., 2017; Louw, 2020).

3.4 Jesus’ Own Death

About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lemasabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) (Matthew 27:46).

According to Christian teachings, Jesus voluntarily died on the cross without escaping from it. Through his own death, he acknowledged and bore all human’s suffering to face death and to be separated from the Father. So that humans can rebuild their relationship with God. In fact, in Christian ethics, it is hoped to achieve the wholeness of human beings in the living experience of life and death in God. It is also about the position and purpose of human beings among themselves, in relation with the universe between heaven, earth and their creator. Life is to find the meaning and hope in the process of life and death. (Louw, 2020) It is plainly because life is a precious gift from God and man is created in God’s image. The main mission of Christians includes loving God and their neighbors. In season and out of season, we must pass on our relationship with God and the love of Jesus to others. If we can practice hope in the quality of life and death in the pandemic, we can bring hopeful power of action to this world that may have lost hope.

4 Summary

In Christian ethics, no matter who the person is regardless of different ages, gender, race or religion. Human being deserves to have the same respect and dignity. It is recommended for any medical practitioner, hospital pastor, for anyone especially for the disadvantaged aging groups in the shortage of resources, they need the special protection from the society for their medical care as well as their mental and spiritual care. We need to allow them to participate and to make their own decision in the situation of life and death. I just learnt that public hospitals in Hong Kong would relax the restriction on ward visits as the pandemic are more at ease in different periods, which is of course a good thing. In the two years, many patients and their relatives have suffered a lot due to the virus. At the end of the day, people gave up or partially gave up the opportunity for good death for themselves and their families for the sake of public health. It

is also recommended that the Hong Kong government should consider more ways to comfort not only for the economic losses from the pandemic. However, the lost human life and dignity that could be measured financially. I suggest that the government and relevant institutions may consider understanding and acknowledge more the pain and loss these people have experienced. For example, the government or institutions can rethink about their service for palliative care in different wards. It is also important to understand that it is important for us to fight the virus. However, we have to priorities and striking the balance between social distancing, mental health and matter of life and death is not only physical but also the spiritual needs of the persons and their family is also very important. Moreover, more long-term support in various aspects, such as enhancing psychological counseling service for the patients and their family member is urgently needed to be acknowledge and implemented. Hospitals and intuitions can hold some collective activities to remember their loss ones. I also know that there are many heroes fighting the virus, such as nurses, doctors, hospital pastors, medical students, or other volunteers, who have given a lot of care, taken a lot of risk and sacrifice to these dying people. Yet the deceased and their family members needed also to be remembered for their sacrifice and contribution to the fights to the pandemic and the public health. They are unsung heroes, and these patients and family members may have sacrificed their well-being involuntarily. They deserve a little more honor and understanding. It is possible that these friends and families who have gone through the grief have never had the opportunity to relieve their knots. People are more focus on fight the pandemic. They might have been forgotten afterwards. However, they are more likely to suffer from post-traumatic sequelae. The government and the public need to pay special attention to care for those who suffer loss (Zhang, 2020). It is suggested that more care should be provided to the elderly and their family who are suffering, especially those who are sick and dying. If we are among those who participate in policies making, health care management or professionals, we can extend our efforts with more assistance and listening to their life story more, to see in their perspective and understand their struggles (Ronaldson et al., 2017). We could support them by letting them to participate more. It is to facilitate them to have more freedom to make choices in the process of life and death. We are encouraged to see and accept their difficulties and ideas. There are ways to many creative ways to give meaning to the matter of life and death in the midst of hardship. It is very important to help people to find hope and meaning of life in the important life stage of elderly and death that we will all face eventually.

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