

# An open letter to all Members of Parliament and of the House of Lords, from leaders of British faith communities of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs, expressing grave concern at continuing and renewed efforts to legalise euthanasia

We, the undersigned, hold all human life to be sacred and worthy of the utmost respect and note with concern that repeated attempts are being made to persuade Parliament to change the law on intentional killing so as to allow assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia for those who are terminally ill. As it appears likely that yet another Bill will be brought before Parliament in the near future, we consider it our duty to bring the following to the attention of Members of both Houses:

- 1. Palliative care is advancing very rapidly** both in relieving the spectrum of suffering experienced by those with a terminal illness, and in supporting their families. However, such state of the art care is very unevenly distributed around the country. Providing good care does not require any change in the law but a reprioritisation of NHS resources in order to ensure that adequate training is given to doctors and nurses and that centres of specialist palliative care exist where they can be accessed by those who need them<sup>1</sup>. The argument that assisted suicide or euthanasia is necessary to deal with the suffering of terminal illness is false.
- 2. Countries which have legalised assisted suicide or euthanasia are experiencing serious problems.** In Holland 1 in every 32 deaths arises from legal or illegal euthanasia<sup>2</sup>: a similar law here could lead to some 13,000 deaths a year<sup>3</sup> and Dutch pro-euthanasia groups are now, moreover, campaigning for further relaxations of the law – for example, to encompass people with dementia<sup>4</sup>. In Oregon the reluctance of many doctors to participate in legalised suicide is leading to ‘doctor-shopping’ with the result that many patients who receive lethal drugs, including some with psychiatric disorders, are not known to the doctors who supply them. There is also no monitoring of lethal drugs released in this way into the community<sup>5</sup>.
- 3. The majority of doctors remain opposed to assisted dying and medical opposition has actually intensified in recent years.** The largest most recent surveys show only 22-38% of doctors in favour of a change in the law.<sup>6,7,8</sup> This was made very clear to the recent House of Lords Select Committee examining Lord Joffe’s Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill<sup>9</sup>. A recent and much-publicised vote at the BMA annual conference to adopt a position of neutrality towards any future bill was unrepresentative of the Association’s 134,000 members. It was carried by a very narrow majority (93 votes to 82) at a barely quorate meeting on the last day of the conference when over half of the delegates had either left or were otherwise engaged. In the debate on the matter two days before, the majority of speakers had opposed any change in the BMA’s opposition to euthanasia. The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) are both opposed to a change in the law.
- 4. Opinion polls purporting to show that a large majority of people would favour a change in the law are misleading.** They are based on answers to Yes/No or Either/Or questions without any explanatory context and without other options - eg good quality palliative care - being offered. Most people have little understanding of the complexities and dangers in changing the law in this way and opinion research consists therefore to a large extent of knee-jerk answers to emotive - and often leading - questions<sup>10</sup>.
- 5. Assisted suicide and euthanasia will radically change the social air we all breathe by severely undermining respect for life.** The previous Lords’ Committee on this issue opposed assisted dying

because of concern that 'vulnerable people - the elderly, lonely, sick or distressed - would feel pressure, whether real or imagined, to request early death.'<sup>11</sup> This concern is just as valid today. The so-called 'right to die' would inexorably become the duty to die and potentially economic pressures and convenience would come to dominate decision-making.

We encourage all Members of both Houses to read the report<sup>12</sup> of the recent Select Committee on Lord Joffe's Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill. This report summarises the arguments on both sides clearly and comprehensively.

**(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> See HL Paper 86-I, Paragraphs 80-90

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Paragraph 131

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Paragraph 243

<sup>4</sup> See HL Paper 86-II, Pages 417-418

<sup>5</sup> See HL Paper 86-I, Paragraph 164

<sup>6</sup> Majority of doctors oppose euthanasia. *Hospital Doctor* 2003; 13 March

<sup>7</sup> Doctors oppose assisted suicide. *Hospital Doctor* 2003; 15 May

<sup>8</sup> See also frontline doctors' responses to recent BMJ editorial advocating euthanasia at <http://bmj.bmjournals.com/cgi/eletters/331/7518/0-g?ehom>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid passim but see, for example, HL86-II Pages 96-164

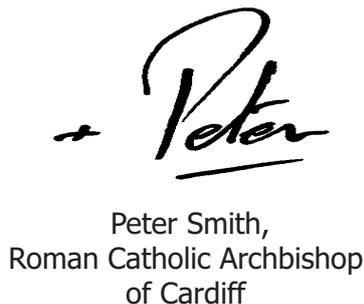
<sup>10</sup> See HL86-I, Pages 75-80

<sup>11</sup> Select Committee on Medical Ethics. Report. London: HMSO, 1994. (House of Lords paper 21-I)

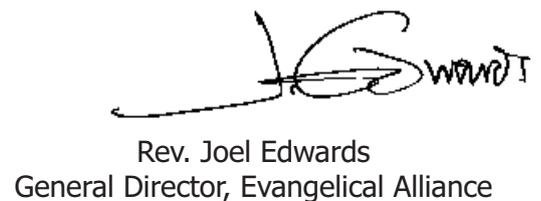
<sup>12</sup> The report was published by The Stationery Office on 4 April 2005 as HL Paper 86



Sir Jonathan Sacks  
Chief Rabbi



Peter Smith,  
Roman Catholic Archbishop  
of Cardiff



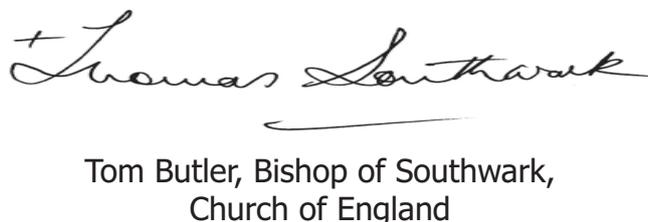
Rev. Joel Edwards  
General Director, Evangelical Alliance



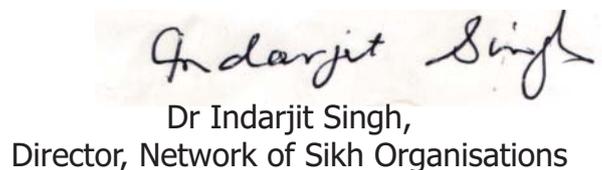
His Eminence Archbishop Gregorios  
of Thyateira and Great Britain (Greek Orthodox)



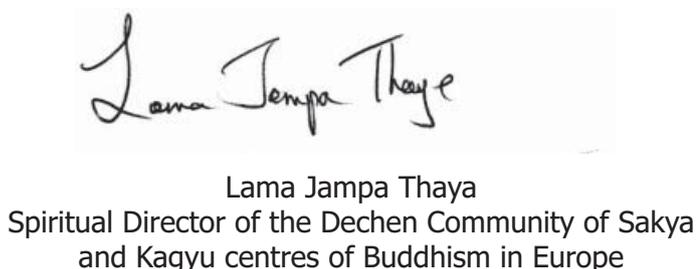
Bimal Krishna das, General  
Secretary, National Council  
of Hindu Temples (UK)



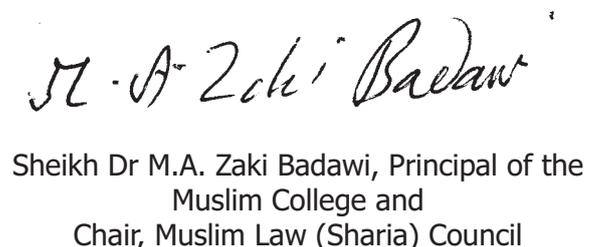
Tom Butler, Bishop of Southwark,  
Church of England



Dr Indarjit Singh,  
Director, Network of Sikh Organisations



Lama Jampa Thaya  
Spiritual Director of the Dechen Community of Sakya  
and Kagyu centres of Buddhism in Europe



Sheikh Dr M.A. Zaki Badawi, Principal of the  
Muslim College and  
Chair, Muslim Law (Sharia) Council