



## **No church-state separation on end of life**

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WHEN DID our uniquely valuable concept of church-state separation get reduced to a quaint notion?

Its loss is particularly lamentable in the case of the California Compassionate Choices Act (Assembly Bill 374) slated for an Assembly vote in the coming weeks. Although polls show approximately 70 percent of Californians want this law, which would legalize physician aid in dying for terminally ill, mentally competent adults, the opposition of Catholic Church officialdom could spell its defeat. I say "officialdom" because most of my Catholic friends (a Field Poll last year put the overall total at 65 percent) tell me they favor the law and would ignore church dogma on this as they do on the issue of birth control. If the law fails, though, their right to choose a peaceful and humane death over prolonged suffering will be a moot point — and my own such right will be denied.

When Cardinal Roger Mahony publicly condemned Speaker Fabian Nunez at a Catholic cathedral in Los Angeles on April 2, a line which has been increasingly blurred was not only crossed but also trampled. Since then, reports indicate growing pressure from the Catholic Church on legislators and on individual church members to oppose this bill. This seems contrary to what the framers of the Constitution had in mind. Speaker Nunez indeed has the right to represent his constituency without being threatened by leaders of his own faith, and his Catholic constituents should have the right to make up their own God-given minds. Instead, they are being accused of taking up the "culture of death" and told they face eternal damnation simply for seeking the legal option to shorten their own suffering.

No religion has a corner on the sanctity of life or mandate to rule this country. For those who hold that life is too sacred to squander its final days or weeks in needless suffering, physician aid in dying is both ethically and legally appropriate in today's society.

AB 374 is not about "suicide." It is about the individual's right to avoid unnecessary suffering at the end of life. It does not force anyone, physician or patient, to participate in anything. Any physician worthy of the calling will admit to giving pain-control medication to suffering patients; many will cite instances in which the patient died. When the necessary pain-relieving drugs happen to cause death, a circumstance called "double effect," it is perfectly legal. AB 374 would simply enable the dying patient to make this choice. It would also put in place significant safeguards to ensure against misuse.

We live in a time when respect for different faith communities is desperately needed. Wise religious leaders who offer insight and understanding can build mutual trust among our diverse cultures, but those who seek to impose their views on all others

are building hostility and suspicion instead. And while they are at it, they are unraveling one of the foundations of our democratic society.

Fran Moreland Johns, author of the nonfiction book "Dying Unafraid," writes often on end-of-life issues. She is on the board of the San Francisco Interfaith Council and the steering committee of the Bay Area Network for End of Life Care, and is board co-chair of Compassion & Choices of Northern California.