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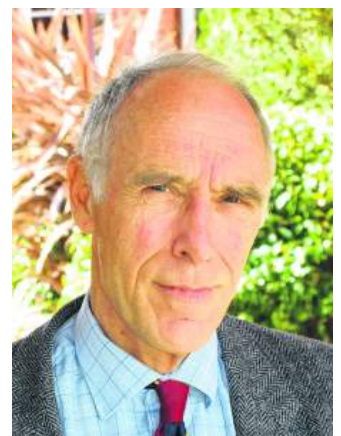
# Euthanasia and the Eighth Commandment

## OPINION PIECE

In the Roman Catholic version of the Ten Commandments, the Eighth is “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour”; an injunction that forbids intentionally deceiving others. One would like to think that Christians, especially the more conservative ones, would consider honouring the truth to be central to the way they conduct their lives.

So when the Eighth Commandment is routinely flouted by conservative Christians campaigning against David Seymour’s End of Life Choice Bill, it seems that truth is subordinated to dogma.

Campaigners for the right for the terminally ill to avoid unnecessary suffering – for that is what it is – are endlessly attacked by religious opponents routinely exaggerating the dangers, but carefully steering clear of that which dare not speak its name – the religious motive



Martin Hanson

not speak its name – the religious motive.

The reason is obvious; just over half the population have no religious beliefs. Religious dogma cuts very little ice with most people, so they have to devise an alternative strategy to avoid any mention of their real motive.

To put it mildly, concocting non-religious arguments has proved challenging, not least, for truth.

A particularly devious tactic has recently come to light in the newspapers. A certain “Stephen Francis” has written letters to The Dominion Post, The Gisborne Herald, The Southland Times, Hawke’s Bay Today, Rodney Times, The Northland Age and most recently The Whanganui Chronicle, all arguing against David Seymour’s End of Life Choice bill.

Nothing surprising about that, but what’s interesting is that “Stephen Francis” does not exist. A bit of sleuthing among electoral rolls has revealed that he is actually Stephen Francis Penk, a Teaching Fellow at Auckland University Law School and formerly Associate Professor of Law and Assistant Dean of the faculty.

Now here’s where it gets really interesting: Stephen Penk is also the father of Chris Penk, MP for Helensville, and Alex Penk, who runs the conservative Maxim Institute. All are committed, conservative Christians who have campaigned publicly against assisted dying.

Perhaps Stephen Penk is too shy to put his own name to the public campaign against voluntary euthanasia, but his submission to a Parliamentary Select Committee outlining legal arguments in opposition under his real name belies that.

Or could it be that three Penks writing to newspapers might seem like one Penk too many?

A more likely explanation is that using a pseudonym creates the impression that opposition to the bill goes beyond a religiously conservative family all campaigning on the same issue.

Whatever the explanation, his deviousness has resulted in this law lecturer and committed Christian being skewered on the three spikes of a trident.

First, protocol at most newspapers forbids pseudonyms, so why would a law lecturer decide that he was exempt from this rule? Maybe God gives him a free pass on this one.

Second, a good Catholic knows perfectly well that the Eighth Commandment forbids deceit. He might have justified this to himself on the basis that “Stephen Francis” is two-thirds of his full name, but most people, and certainly newspaper editors, would consider this overly legalistic.

Third, Stephen Penk, alias Stephen Francis, has put himself in the very odd position of publicly commenting on a letter by his son to The Gisborne Herald and demanding an apology on his behalf without identifying himself as Chris Penk’s father.

Ironically, his desire for anonymity is likely to have boomeranged and produced precisely the opposite effect.

Join the discussion...

[Ann David, Waikanae](#) - 10 months ago

If it is true that Stephen Penk's motivation was religious and merely disguised as social "concern", then he may not be entirely to blame for adopting a false identity.

Apart from wanting to hide his connection with his son, MP Chris Penk, by helping his crusade against David Seymour's End of Life Choice Bill in Parliament disguised as a "common foot soldier", he may have taken his cue from Catholic MP Simon O'Connor.

Mr O'Connor is famous for making a reply speech in Parliament vowing never, ever to allow assisted dying to be legalised in New Zealand. He urges the Catholic faithful to oppose the End of Life Choice Bill but to avoid disclosing their religious affiliation. Here is one example from [www.nzcatholic.org.nz/2018/02/05/16660](http://www.nzcatholic.org.nz/2018/02/05/16660) : "You can have religious objections and there's nothing wrong with that and you can say it. However, it's not the best way as the secular world is not accepting of people's religious beliefs and is becoming less tolerant."

Mr O'Connor trained as a Catholic seminarian and his messages are entirely in sync with those of the Catholic bishops, including assuring the public that modern palliative care will ensure no suffering for the dying, in spite of reports and data to the contrary, including data from palliative care itself.

This pressure from the bishops downwards is an overwhelming influence on a faithful Catholic, almost irresistible. It is a call to make the "ends justify the means". Parishioners are vulnerable, possibly even subtly coerced. I can see how Stephen Francis Penk could have crumbled under it if he is one of their circle.

But MP Simon O'Connor is right: the world is indeed becoming less tolerant of religious belief. No prizes for guessing why.

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[Graham Adams, Auckland](#) - 10 months ago

It's very odd that the father of sitting MP Chris Penk would anonymously demand an apology for his son (in the comments section) without disclosing their relationship. It is also extremely odd, as Martin Hanson notes, that in a deeply religious family very publicly opposed to assisted dying none of them ever mentioned religion in their articles and letters opposing its legalisation. But then again the Catholic church, with the exception of Ken Orr, doesn't mention religion either in its campaign to stop David Seymour's bill. Witnessing for Christ once played a fundamental role in Christian fellowship but now Catholics in particular are keen to deny him and their faith publicly, even as they work to deny others the opportunity to avoid suffering at the very end of their life. Strange times, indeed.

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[Paul Francis, Turangi](#) - 10 months ago

Desperately needing new numbers to talk about after public submissions?

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[David, Christchurch](#) - 10 months ago

Reading through this article just demonstrates that Martin Hanson wants to make ad hominem attacks instead of engaging with the content of the letters. It is disappointing to see that The Gisborne Herald allows such poor writing to be added to the debate.

Firstly, using a pseudonym is a common ploy. Sure it breaks the newspaper's terms and conditions - but so what? Who wrote the letter doesn't change its content. Activists on both sides of the spectrum do this all the time.

Secondly, the scriptural exegesis is rubbish. There are plenty of defensible lies in the world - Santa Claus? 100% Pure New Zealand? That newspapers are unbiased? They're all lies that The Gisborne Herald accepts all the time.

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[Martin Hanson, Nelson](#) - 10 months ago

If "David" feels that drawing attention to wrongdoing constitutes an ad hominem (personal) attack, it's tantamount to an admission that the accusation was well on target and that the truth must have therefore been embarrassing. With friends like this, Mr Penk has no need of enemies. The fact that "David" can't bring himself to use his full name when attempting to defend a fellow anonymous writer suggests he has little confidence in his argument. Little wonder then that he skulks behind a pseudonym.

Moreover, in admitting that Penk breached newspaper policy, his retort of "so what?" suggests that he doesn't see anything wrong with such deception.

If that's the case, I don't think I can help him by commenting further.

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[Alida Van der Velde, Waikanae](#) - 10 months ago

Thanks to Mr Hanson (30/1/19) for exposing the deceit of Mr Penk Sr ("Stephen Francis") in the above-mentioned newspapers. A law professor and a committed conservative Christian, what an embarrassment in the Penk household!

Yes, I was one of the people who, in good faith, responded to one of Mr Penk Sr's very average letters in one of the newspapers. If I would have known this man was Chris Penk's dad I truly would not have bothered writing. I am quite familiar with Chris Penk's use of secular arguments in an attempt to roadblock the End of Life Choice Bill currently before Parliament, in an attempt to hide the facts that his real arguments are based on his fundamental Christian convictions.

I am looking forward to a public apology in your paper from Mr Penk Sr and his son Chris Penk. "It is the putting right that counts" Mr Penk.

Alida Van Der Velde, 109 Winara Avenue 5036. Waikanae.

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[Tania Petersen, Hawke's Bay](#) - 10 months ago

This is ridiculous, people have used pseudonyms since forever - you may have heard of Mark Twain. This is especially important when you are in a position such as the professor's where your employer does not want controversy associated with their name. This whole article is anti-Christian in its bias. Regardless of your viewpoint on euthanasia, would you ever trust your life or your family member in the hands of people such as the politicians or a committee of approved members who have the power of life or death?

