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## Religious Leaders' Views on Radical Life Extension

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## Religious Leaders' Views on Radical Life Extension

No religious group in the United States has released an official statement on radical life extension. However, here are brief summaries of how some clergy, bioethicists and other scholars from 18 major American religious groups say their traditions might approach this evolving issue. (For an in-depth look at public opinion on radical life extension and related issues, see [“Living to 120 and Beyond: Americans’ Views on Aging, Medical Advances and Radical Life Extension.”](#) And for an overview of the scientific research and emerging ethical debate, see [“To Count Our Days: The Scientific and Ethical Dimensions of Radical Life Extension.”](#))

### American Baptist Churches USA

Members of different ABC-USA congregations would likely come to different conclusions on radical life extension, and all sides would inevitably find biblical support for their views, so any official statement from the church would “reflect the diversity of [the] denomination,” says Terry Rosell, a bioethicist and professor of pastoral theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Shawnee, Kan. A statement from the church would likely raise questions about life extension and place those questions in the context of the denomination’s commonly held values, such as respect for life, acceptance of mortality, the equal availability of treatments, and the mandate to prevent suffering and premature death, he says. Such a statement would give church members “a basis for discussion” rather than direction or guidance, Rosell says, since the church does not issue “binding” pronouncements on these types of issues.

Related link:

[\*Policy Statements and Resolutions of the ABC-USA, including a statement on Death and Dying\*](#)

### Buddhism

There is no central Buddhist authority in the U.S., so no single individual or organization could speak for all Buddhists on the ethics of radical life extension, but many Buddhists would likely see such therapies in a positive light, says James Hughes, a former Buddhist monk who now serves as executive director of the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies, a think tank in Hartford, Conn. According to Hughes, Buddhists believe each person is responsible for his or her own karma – the idea that the good and bad things that happen to people in life are the result of what they did in the past. Only by realizing the ephemeral nature of existence and the

illusory nature of the self, Hughes says, will one stop creating bad karma and come closer to nirvana, or freedom from suffering. Dramatically longer life would be beneficial, he says, because it would give each person more time to learn wisdom and compassion and to achieve nirvana.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, a Buddhist nun and associate professor of Buddhist studies at the University of San Diego, agrees with Hughes, but she also cautions that, from the Buddhist perspective, life extension might not benefit everyone. “If a person is living a nonvirtuous life – for example, needlessly killing others – perhaps a short life is better,” she says, because it would minimize the opportunity to accumulate bad karma.

### **Catholic Church**

Pope Francis has not spoken publicly on the issue of life extension, but his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, expressed concern that significantly increasing longevity could strip life of its richest experiences – including the search for the transcendent and the need to have children as a hedge against mortality. A 2004 theological commission headed by Benedict (at the time, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) alluded to the issue, saying that “disposing of death is in reality the most radical way of disposing of life.” And in his homily on Holy Saturday in 2010, Benedict warned against postponing death indefinitely: “Humanity would become extraordinarily old, [and] there would be no more room for youth. Capacity for innovation would die, and endless life would be no paradise.”

At the same time, some Catholic scholars believe the church might support some life-extension therapies, especially if they came as part of a broader attempt to cure disease. “Catholics are called upon to alleviate suffering and illness,” says Father Nicanor Austriaco, a biologist, theologian and ethicist who teaches at Providence College in Rhode Island. This call to heal, he says, is why the church has often supported new and even controversial research, such as genetic engineering, and why it might support modest life-extension efforts.

If life extension becomes a reality, Catholics likely would be committed to ensuring that the new treatments are available to all, says Marie Hilliard, director of bioethics and public policy at the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia. Indeed, Hilliard notes, the church is keen to prevent the kind of situation that occurred during the 1990s, when life-saving HIV drugs were available to patients in the developed world but largely unavailable to millions of HIV and AIDS sufferers in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world.

According to Monsignor Tom Green, a professor of law at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., the church's response to any life-extension breakthrough would probably begin at the local level. "As issues arise, experts help to raise and explain them to bishops, who then often issue ethical directives to Catholic institutions, like hospitals," Green says. At some point, he says, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops might issue guidelines to lay Catholics and Catholic institutions. Eventually, he adds, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican department that helps clarify Catholic doctrine and moral teachings, might issue a document with instruction on the issue. "All of this usually takes time," Green says. "We tend to move slowly in the church."

Related links:

[\*"Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God," a 2004 church document\*](#)

[\*Pope Benedict XVI's homily on postponing death, delivered on Holy Saturday, April 3, 2010\*](#)

### **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon Church)**

The Mormon Church would probably not issue a statement prohibiting life-extension therapy, as long as the therapy does not involve significant changes to the human body, says Steven Peck, a bioethicist at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. "The church believes that the human body is sacred, which is why it even discourages body piercing and tattoos," he says. "So, as long as the body remained the same, as long as you were only giving people more of what they already have without big alterations, I think it would be fine." On the other hand, "if there was a sense that [life-extension therapy] was desecrating the body, that would be a problem," Peck says.

Related link:

[\*From the Mormon Church's "Handbook 2: Administering the Church," Section 21.3.8, "Prolonging Life"\*](#)

### **Episcopal Church**

In all likelihood, the Episcopal Church would cautiously welcome life-extension therapy, says the Rev. Alistair So, chair of the church's Executive Council Committee on Science, Technology and Faith and rector of All Hallows Parish in Davidsonville, Md. "Currently, there is nothing in the teachings of the church against life extension," says So. However, he adds, any church statement welcoming the development probably would be leavened with a warning against

making life extension the focus of life. In addition, he says, Episcopalians likely would call for the benefits of life-extension therapy to be available to all.

A potential statement by the church would come from its governing body, the General Convention. “The General Convention would ask its Committee on Science, Technology and Faith to study the issue and report back to the convention with their recommendations,” says the retired Rev. Gregory Straub, who served as executive secretary of the General Convention from 2005-2012. “The convention would then vote on these recommendations and, if they approved them, would issue a statement for purposes of informing Episcopalians about church teaching and to set church policy in terms of our efforts to influence government policy,” Straub says.

Related links:

*[“Extending Human Life,” a report by the Working Group on Faith and Genetics of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts](#)*

*[Website of the Episcopal Church Network for Science, Technology and Faith](#)*

## **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America would probably approach life-extending medical developments with caution and humility, says Paul Nelson, a theologian at Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio. He says his church would likely avoid drawing “bright lines” dictating what people should or should not do. By way of example, Nelson points to an official statement, “Genetics, Faith and Responsibility,” which was approved in 2011 by the church’s supreme governing body, the Churchwide Assembly. While the document deals with a host of different issues, it briefly touches on longevity, calling for “reasonable life extension without expecting or seeking perfection.” It also addresses the question of equity, warning that life extension should “not lead to unjust and disproportionately biased use of limited human and financial resources.”

Related link:

*[ELCA statement on “Genetics, Faith and Responsibility”](#)*

## **Hinduism**

There is no central authority in Hinduism, so there likely would not be an official Hindu position on life extension. But most Hindus are unlikely to object to significantly extending

human life, according to Arvind Sharma, a professor of comparative religion at McGill University in Montreal who has written about Hinduism and life extension. “The normal blessing in Hinduism is ‘Live long.’ So why not live longer?” he says. In addition, Hindu scriptures describe a “golden age” in the deep past when people lived 400 years. “Life extension would be seen as a return to this golden age,” Sharma says.

Related link:

[\*"Hinduism: Life and death," by Shaheen E. Lakhani\*](#)

## Islam

Radically extending life “probably wouldn’t be a problem for most” Muslims, according to Aisha Musa, a professor of religion at Colgate University who has written about the issue from a Muslim perspective. According to Musa and others, Muslims believe Allah (God) knows the exact life span of each person from birth to death, or what the Quran calls one’s “term appointed” (Sura 40:67). “Since you can’t really violate God’s plan for you, life extension is alright because it’s part of God’s will,” Musa says.

Given this outlook, many Muslims would likely see life-extending technologies as in accordance with God’s plan for humanity. “Whenever there is something new, Muslims believe that it has happened with God’s endorsement,” says Abdulaziz Sachedina, chair of Islamic studies at George Mason University and the author of “Islamic Biomedical Ethics.” “Whatever we do, God has a hand in it.”

Neither major branch of Islam (Sunni and Shia) has a central authority that would issue a decree on life extension. But Shia Muslims do follow religious leaders known as grand ayatollahs, who issue religious edicts, called fatwas, that are binding on their followers.

According to Mohsen Kadivar, a Shia theologian and philosopher based in Iran but currently teaching at Duke University in Durham, N.C., many Shia ayatollahs would likely sanction life-extension therapies as long as their object was not to extend life indefinitely. “There is a difference between life extension and immortality,” Kadivar says, adding, “The first is acceptable and the second is not acceptable, according to Islam and the Quran.”

Musa and Sachedina, who are Sunni, agree that striving for immortality would go against Islamic teachings because it would keep Muslims from heaven. “There is a deep-seated belief that death is a blessing,” Sachedina says. “We look forward to dying.”

## Judaism

Rabbi Barry Freundel, an ethicist and theologian who also leads an Orthodox Jewish congregation, Keshet Israel, in Washington, D.C., expects most Jewish scholars to support efforts to radically extend human life. “Judaism has a very positive view of life ... so the more of it, the better,” he says. According to Freundel, most Jews would view a prolonged human life span as an opportunity to better serve God and mankind. “The goal in Judaism is to make the world better and [extended life] would allow us to do more of that,” he says.

Rabbi Eric Wisnia of Reform Congregation Beth Chaim in Princeton Junction, N.J., agrees that most Jewish thinkers are likely to embrace life extension. “Prolonging life and saving life, no matter how long, is a great thing,” he says, adding that longer lives would allow people to better teach and serve future generations. “Human beings are built for cumulative knowledge, and the older we are, supposedly the more wise we are,” Wisnia says.

While many Jewish thinkers might embrace life extension, there is little chance that any of the three major Jewish traditions in the United States – Reform, Conservative and Orthodox – would take an official position on the issue, says Conservative Rabbi Elliot Dorff, a professor of philosophy at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles. “Judaism is not a creedal religion. So, even in the Orthodox world ... they would be unlikely to draw bright lines,” Dorff says, adding: Jewish theologians might “offer their views” on the topic, but they would be regarded as the scholars’ personal opinions.

## Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations, which issues statements and study guides on theological issues, has not issued a report on life extension, nor does it have any plans to do so, according to the commission’s executive director, Joel Lehenbauer. If, in the future, the denomination were to take a position on the issue, Lehenbauer says, it would reflect two principles: the church’s “very public and very consistent ... pro-life position” and its wariness of “the over-regard for life for life’s sake.” This means the commission would not endorse the use of life-extending technologies if they were created using methods involving the destruction of embryos, including embryonic stem-cell research and human cloning, he says. The church also would likely caution people not to extend their lives in an attempt to avoid the “basic scriptural fact” that everyone must die. Says Lehenbauer: “We don’t worship life. We worship God, who is the author of life.”

Related link:

*"What Child Is This? Marriage, Family and Human Cloning." a report from the church's Commission on Theology and Church Relations*

## **National Baptist Convention, USA**

New technologies that greatly extend life probably would be welcomed by many leaders and members of the National Baptist Convention, the largest historically black Protestant denomination in the U.S., according to the Rev. Charles Brown, former senior pastor of Bethel Missionary Baptist Church in Dayton, Ohio, and professor of Christian ethics at Payne Theological Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio. "I think we would embrace it because we welcome the blessings of a longer life so that we can make more of a contribution to society," Brown says.

"I'm sure it would be considered good as long as it was used for good," agrees the Rev. Marcus Gibson, senior pastor of the Greater Shady Grove Missionary Baptist Church in Columbus, Ga. "We firmly believe science can be used to advance God's purposes."

The National Baptist Convention does not typically issue policy papers or official statements on new scientific or social developments. But Brown says that the NBC's leaders, including its national president, would likely speak at church events, such as the denomination's Annual Session, and offer guidance on the issue of extending life. "I think the president, whoever he is, would affirm that this is a good thing and that we should use this time to further engage in the work of God's Kingdom," Brown says. But, he adds, the national president might also warn against hubris: "I think he would warn against the danger of assuming that because we can live longer, we are no longer in God's hands and that we no longer need God."

Both Brown and Gibson suggest that many African-Americans, both inside and outside of the National Baptist Convention, would embrace life extension because their history has taught them to persevere through hardship and to make the most of new opportunities. "There is something in our historical fiber that might make us want this, after having been denied so much for hundreds of years," Gibson says. Brown agrees: "We have gone from a sense of impossibility in the 20th century to one of possibility in the 21st, and I think we want as much chance as we can to participate in these new possibilities."

## **Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.**



The Presbyterian Church would probably not ban life-extension therapy, says Charles Wiley, coordinator of the church's Office of Theology and Worship. "Presbyterians trust science ... so there is no obvious reason to be inherently skeptical of life extension," he says. Instead, Wiley adds, Presbyterian leaders would likely urge people to use whatever extra time they have "in the service of the church and God."

While the church might endorse life-extension therapy, Wiley says, it also might feel the need to warn people of the possible dangers. For instance, he says, Presbyterian leaders probably would want to make sure that the new therapies are available to everyone, not just the wealthy. And, he adds, the church likely would be concerned that life extension not take the place of God as the focus of peoples' lives. "This could be an idol [people worship] that out idols all others," he says.

Related link:

*Website of the [Presbyterian Association on Science, Technology and the Christian Faith](#)*

## Quakers

Unlike many Protestant denominations, Quakers do not have a central body or authority that could release an official statement on life extension. If the issue were debated in the U.S. Congress, however, the Friends Committee on National Legislation, a Washington-based advocacy group for the church, might take a position, says Margery Post Abbott, a Quaker author and thinker. In addition, she says, if enough congregations begin to consider life extension, it could become a topic of discussion at the Quakers' regional Yearly Meetings, which pass nonbinding resolutions on issues of social concern.

Many Quakers would have serious concerns about therapies to extend life, Abbott predicts. Indeed, she says, Quakers believe people should accept death and not struggle to delay it. "Our view is counter to the attitude that one should do everything to extend life," she says. In addition, Abbott thinks many in her church would have reservations about whether the therapies would be available to everyone and whether dramatically extending human life would negatively impact the environment. "We are already overloading our planet's resources ... and this could make the resource issue much worse," she says.

Related link:

*"[Whose DNA Is It Anyway?](#)" by Margery Post Abbott, from the February 2007 issue of *Friends Journal**

## Seventh-day Adventist Church

If the Seventh-day Adventists' highest governing body, the General Conference, were to debate life extension in the future, its members would likely vote in favor of it, says Allan Handysides, director of health ministries for the church. "In our view, the purpose of health is to fulfill the church's mission – to witness to the grace of Jesus Christ," he says, adding that the church already encourages its members to live a healthy lifestyle. "The longer we live and the healthier we are, the better we can do our work," Handysides says. "Viewed in this light, one can make a case for greater longevity." However, he says, life-extension therapies "would need to be available to everyone" to receive the church's support.

Related links:

*["Stem Cell Research: What is a Christian to Do?"](#) by Allan Handysides, from the June 2008 issue of *Ministry* magazine*

*[Statement on Ethical Considerations Regarding Human Cloning](#)*

## Southern Baptist Convention

If the Southern Baptist Convention, America's largest Protestant denomination, chose to address an issue such as life extension, it likely would do so in the form of a resolution from its annual meeting or as an opinion from the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the SBC's public policy arm. Though neither of these entities has addressed life extension, R. Albert Mohler, one of the church's leading thinkers and the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has spoken out against the desire to put off death indefinitely.

"Christians certainly do not embrace death as a good in itself," Mohler told the *Deseret News* in 2006, "but we understand that death is a part of what it means to be human, and that the effort to forever forestall death is itself an act of defiance that will be both unworkable and morally suspect."

Jeffrey Riley, who teaches theology at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, believes many evangelicals would likely accept and use life-extension therapies. But the extent of that acceptance "would depend on how it was being advertised," he says. "If this was being advertised as never dying, I think a lot of people and the leadership of my church would be opposed. However, if this was incremental and was seen as a way for people to continue flourishing, my church would more readily accept it."

Related links:

*Deseret News* article about transhumanism – a movement based on the idea that humans will continue to develop beyond today's biological limits – entitled "[Shall We Enhance?](#)" including comments from Albert Mohler

[Statement on Human Species Altering Technologies](#) from the SBC's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission

## Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

The Unitarian Universalist Association has a process that allows member congregations to propose resolutions that communicate the denomination's position on common issues. These resolutions, called Statements of Conscience, are not binding, and congregations often interpret and implement them differently. According to Michael Hogue, associate professor of theology at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, a Statement of Conscience on life extension "would probably come down [against it]." Opposition would likely stem from "ecological concerns as well as concerns about economic justice," he says, referring to the environmental impact of faster population growth and the possibility that only the wealthy would be able to afford life-extension therapies. While Unitarian Universalists highly value each individual's right to shape his or her own life, Hogue says, the desire to avoid deepening social and economic inequalities and environmental problems "would probably override the right to extend one's life."

Related link:

[The Right to Die with Dignity](#), a 1988 General Resolution

## United Church of Christ

While the United Church of Christ occasionally takes positions on what it considers vitally important social issues, such as racial equality or human trafficking, most moral and ethical questions are discussed and debated by each congregation rather than by a churchwide body, according to Ronald Cole-Turner, an ordained UCC minister and professor of ethics at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He believes that if radical life extension comes to pass, individual congregations would discuss the issue and decide what, if anything, to recommend to their members. "As a denomination, we will be a patchwork of positions, mostly based on local connections and local history," Cole-Turner says. "We will not ask for any legislative or

political muscle behind one position or the other and will leave it largely to individuals ... to make up their own minds about whether and how far to use such technologies.”

### **United Methodist Church**

The United Methodist Church often approaches new moral or ethical issues by appointing a task force including experts, theologians and church officials and charging them with drafting an official statement aimed at offering guidance to church members. If such a task force was appointed in response to a breakthrough in life-extension research, it would consider a host of factors, ranging from economic questions to generational considerations about marriage and family relationships, says Sondra Wheeler, a professor of Christian ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. Once a draft was produced, the church's highest governing body, the General Conference, would likely modify and issue it, she adds. If past ethical debates are any indication, Wheeler says, a statement from the church on life extension might raise possible concerns about it but would not take a strong position on whether people should avail themselves of the new therapy.