Capital Punishment: Religions

▼ Rules and views

There are two main ways in which religion influences the way some people think when they are trying to decide whether capital punishment is right or wrong. (See also page 165.)

1. Religions have rules or commandments which are believed to have absolute or divine authority. For example, ‘You shall not kill.’ In some religions death is prescribed for certain crimes.

2. Religions also have teachings or doctrines about what human beings are supposed to be like. They may say, for example, that human beings are in a special relationship with God.

In the Sikh scriptures it says:

"God lives in everything. He dwells in every heart." [Guru Arjan]

Because of this, actions which hurt or kill human beings might be thought to be wrong. Decisions are affected by the view taken of the meaning and purpose of life.

So it is not just a matter of looking for rules written in scriptures that matters. We also have to try to understand what the important doctrines are. This is especially true of the question of putting people to death, because it is such an extreme thing to do. Putting someone to death judicially, must mean at least having a philosophy about the position of an individual in society.

Followers of all the religions studied here are divided in their views. One difficulty is that the same statement can lead to different conclusions. For example, the statement that human beings are made by God, which appears in most religions, can lead to quite opposite conclusions about the death penalty. On the one hand some interpret it to mean that because God made human beings we should never account a life - even for murder. On the other hand it is argued that human life is so precious that anyone who kills deliberately must in turn be put to death! It is therefore important to remember when reading the texts from various sources that much will depend on the particular way it is understood.

▼ Discuss in a small group which side you would take in the debate in the previous paragraph. That is, does the belief that God created human beings make the death penalty for murder more justified or less?

Another aspect which could influence decisions is what each religion believes happens after death. Some religions, for example, consider that our souls are reborn in new bodies. Others believe that there is a divine judgement which follows death.
Christianity

What Christianity has to say about right and wrong is not discovered simply by turning to a text in the Bible. The Bible gives an account of the 'central events' of the faith and does not deal directly with every single question which may arise.

Christian practice is also guided by a long tradition of teaching in the Church. Some of this teaching has been controversial and disputes have led to divisions of the Church into separate groups.

In the case of capital punishment, the Churches have themselves often pronounced the sentence of death. In perhaps more violent times there have been numerous executions for 'heretics', that is, those considered to be holding wrong or dangerous beliefs. Catholics and Protestants have both persecuted each other in this way. In the present time many Christians have come to hold the view that capital punishment is totally against the spirit of Christian teaching. In rethinking their attitude, Christians try to return to the central event of Christianity which is founded on the coming of Jesus Christ, whom Christians believe to be God. He was executed by the Romans by the method of crucifixion. His rising from the dead to eternal life is central to Christian belief.

What the scriptures say

During the period of the development of Christianity, capital punishment was an accepted part of the legal system and it was more or less taken for granted. Capital punishment continues to be supported by some Christians. There is no direct statement in Christian scriptures which forbids its use.

The Sermon on the Mount

Christians, in trying to make up their minds, take account of the teaching of Jesus, such as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). Here are short extracts:

66 You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgement.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgement; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire. . . .

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

[Matthew 5:21–2, 38–45]
Did Jesus give laws?

Many Christians think that Jesus came to do away with the idea of ‘laws’ in the usual sense. His words were certainly not meant to become part of the legal system of any country. These Christians argue that Jesus’ sayings really express a ‘spirit’ or an ‘attitude’. They were not meant to be used as laws. The Sermon on the Mount, they say, expresses an ideal situation, which is a hope for the future. So if you take this view, you cannot just take Jesus’ words and say ‘there is the Christian position’. You have to understand the spirit of them and work out what they mean for particular situations.

‘Christ and the woman taken in adultery.’ Read John 8:1–11. The German words at the top of the picture are Jesus’ words from verse 7: ‘Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.’ Do you think these words have anything to do with how we should think of punishment? Why do you think the punishment was death by stoning? How do we view adultery today? Is it unlikely that they would have brought a man taken in adultery to Jesus. What do you think about this? This sixteenth-century painting has some very precise portraits. Look carefully and discuss them with others.