Hindus believe that all humans have an immortal soul. ‘Immortal’ means that it does not die when the body dies. That soul, called atman, is then free to enter another body which is being born. Another belief is karma. This means that every action has a result. What happens to us is the consequence of our own actions. These actions can be ones which we have done in this present life or in a previous life. For many Hindus the immortal soul, atman, mentioned above, is part of Brahma, which is the word for ‘ultimate reality’ in Hinduism.

Below is a brief quotation from a Hindu scripture called the Vaishnava-dharma-ashastra.

**The Indestructible self**

Kala [time] is no one’s friend and no one’s enemy: when the effect of his acts in a former existence, by which his present existence is caused, has expired he snatches a man away forcibly...

As a man puts on new clothes in this world, throwing aside those which he formerly wore, even so the self [atman or soul] of man puts on new bodies, which are in accordance with his acts [in a former life].

No weapons will hurt the self of man, no fire burn it, no waters moisten it, and no wind dry it up.

It is not to be hurt, not to be burnt, not to be moistened, and not to be dried up; it is imperishable, perpetual, unchanging, immovable, without beginning.

It is further said to be immaterial, passing all thought, and immutable. Knowing the self [atman] of man to be such, you must not grieve [for the destruction of his body].

[20:43,50–3]

Read this passage again carefully and write down what it says about the ‘self’ or ‘atman’. What effect might this have on a view of capital punishment?

**Non-violence**

Many Hindus believe in non-violence. This view was greatly strengthened by the teaching and example of Mahatma Gandhi (see pages 130–1). The way in which Hindus decide about right and wrong comes from something called dharma. This is sometimes translated as ‘law’. But it is a little more complicated than that. Each person is born in a particular caste and is therefore expected to live by the laws of that caste. So if you are born in a soldier caste you will be required to kill under certain circumstances. In the famous book, the Bhagavad Gita, this was the dilemma facing Arjuna as he prepared for battle. His instincts told him not to kill but his dharma required him to do it (see pages 128–9).

Here is something Gandhi wrote about non-violence:

When a person claims to be non-violent, he is expected not to be angry with one who has injured him. He will not wish him harm; he will wish him well; he will not swear at him; he will not cause him any physical hurt. He will put up with all the injury to which he is subjected by the wrong-doer. . . . Non-violence is therefore in its active form goodwill towards all life. It is pure Love. I read it in the Hindu scriptures, in the Bible, in the Qur’an.