



CHRISTIANITY AND THE DEATH PENALTY

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Article History

Received: 07.03.2024

Accepted: 14.04.2024

Published: 26.04.2024

Abstract: What should be the Christian attitude towards the death penalty? The Church has never ruled it out as immoral. However, contemporary Liberalism tends to view it as the barbaric vestige of an unenlightened age, and many Christians esteem that Christianity should be at least as compassionate as Liberalism. This is contested, however, because Christianity has never considered life in this world as the highest value. As self-seeking narcissism becomes the accepted default ethic of our time, however, the one place Liberalism seems to concede that the death penalty may be permitted and even necessary is when narcissism grows beyond civilized bounds and tolerates murder as a violation of the earlier 'human right' to life, unapologetically viewing other people reductively as either instruments for or obstacles to a subject's personal advancement. When they develop into the latter, they may conveniently but unobtrusively be gotten 'out of the way'.

Keywords: Death Penalty, Christianity, Narcissism.

Cite this article:

Madigan, P., (2024). CHRISTIANITY AND THE DEATH PENALTY. *ISAR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(4), 25-28.

Introduction

The moral propriety of imposing the death penalty continues to bedevil Christian discussions of responsible and enlightened judicial practice in an era characterized by both a psychologically inflected and more compassionate understanding of human agency on the one hand and unprecedented, flamboyant crimes of human cruelty, torture and death - as in anonymous serial killing - on the other. The psychological pressure that the Christian position on capital punishment should, for that reason, be different from a 'secular' viewpoint, interpreted as unavoidably cruel because an immediate deliverance from 'natural' or 'unconverted' impulses towards retaliation or 'pay-back', sets up expectations that influence the discussion in certain *fora*, as does occasionally its opposite – the expectation that Christianity must treat all people equally, and without embarrassment call all to live up to similar basic standards of propriety and morality. Early Christian communities impressed their neighbors by the fact that (1) they were made up of members from different ethnic groups and social backgrounds, and (2) they were careful not to become a social nuisance, draw attention to themselves or burden the larger population, by taking care of their own through mutual aid and charity. When Christianity became the official cult of the empire, sooner or later it had to address the death sentence.

Christian authors never ruled out the death penalty as inherently immoral. It was retained as an acceptable penalty for the most serious offenses – murder, treason, banditry, insurrection, mutiny, etc. That the state had to be ruled by an authority, disobedience to whom in important matters was appropriately punished by death, was widely accepted and practiced. In an era where each city had its 'official' divine patron, devotion to 'strange' gods coming from distant parts of the empire (or beyond) were carefully monitored as possible covers for rebellion or provocations towards social

disturbance. All the Christian apostles we know of - including St. Paul - were put to death.

Jesus never prayed in the Temple. He *taught* in the Temple. When he wanted to pray, he withdrew to a deserted place and spent the night alone. Further, he had the habit of referring to the Jewish God as 'my Father' – a scandalously presumptuous, deliberately provocative, and astronomically self-centering utterance for a Jewish male to make. When John the Baptist was executed for criticizing the marriage of his Roman governor, Jesus seems to have gotten the message concerning the fate his disruptive social behavior might be leading him towards; he henceforth turned aside political or military inquiries. Also, his riding into Jerusalem on a prophetic donkey, rather than a Davidic stallion – as also his punishing the money-changers carrying out legitimate business in the forecourt of the Temple – were clear evidence that he had narrowed and specified - rather than completely abandoned - his fate. He would expend himself - in fact, give his life - for the 'restoration of the Kingdom of Israel', but the latter would take a form different from the independent, self-standing monarchy his rivals in the rebellion after his death dreamed of. The ancient ambition of Israel to become a 'great nation' towards which all the kingdoms of the earth would come streaming' died a horrific and exorbitantly cruel death, involving a humiliation and misery that became legendary. They did indeed become a dire warning and forbidding example to the wider world, but not in the manner in which they first imagined themselves.

Death was not final for Jesus, and death is not final for a Christian. After death there is judgment. Judgment is related to what we inherited and to what we leave for others – to legacy received and to legacy established for those who will come after - because the latter affected why we made certain choices. No one knows all that goes on in judgment, but it would be a mistake to

take it lightly; God deals with adults, not children. All our excuses go by the boards. We are not responsible for everything that happened, but we are responsible for what we did. All our possibilities, all our graces, as well as all our handicaps and difficulties are taken into account. The point I wish to make here is the unique dignity that characterizes this occasion and its proceedings. Our basic choices are set in sharp relief. Mitigating circumstances wash away as blurring the main point. Mood and season of the original act are airbrushed out. Historical accidents that accompanied or attended a decision made years before 'melt' backwards; leaving only the 'headline'. Nor is each thing final, for its significance changes and depends on what we built upon it later.. One reason we value sports records as unique is that they seem fixed and unchanging - almost the only thing that is. Yet even for these, what they 'mean' changes. Indeed, for everything we do, what they 'mean' changes with each passing moment, as its historical legacy spills further outward. For example, why compete in sports at all? Thus in the end, we are responsible - as responsible as we allow ourselves to become.

Judgment is the most serious dignity we have. Animals don't have judgment, for no one holds them responsible for what happens to them. Animals are dependent upon us for what happens to them. For better or for worse, we have taken the world upon our necks, and it is impossible to pull it off or give it back. You can't see it - we look like the other animals - but from that first moment on, we go together and cannot become unstuck. Every decision we make affects this 'world' one can't see but to which we are attached - not just our personal world, but also the 'common world' which our actions participate in, build up or tear down, rearrange, for which as a consequence we as a whole are loosely responsible. The latter functions as a kind of report card or rolling account, giving sum totals and average values on the myriad topics we think about, discuss or make a decision. Our faces fall into pre-human inscrutability as we try to escape responsibility, but our actions betray our true feelings and give our actual positions away. Through them people can look at our personal world as at an unmade bed, and then look back at me. 'What are you doing to us?' they ask. Moving from the personal to the common world is the most serious way we have of affecting one another, by pointing out hitherto unseen dimensions that can change the way things *mean*.

This is where capital punishment becomes an issue.

As said, extending an action from our personal world to the common world is a tentative attempt at establishing a *value*. The common world is always-already semi-established. Although open to new suggestions, it codifies what has so far been considered valuable. The work-a-day presumption is that whatever reinforces, anchors, or extends lines of value already established is itself valuable. This direction could be altered by a revolutionary experience, but after many generations the burden of proof lies on the other side. We are ourselves evaluated, and evaluate others, by how much they contribute towards, correctly appraise, and successfully obtain what our common world considers valuable. Sometimes our attempts to propose a new value are beaten back as inexperienced, short-sighted or immature; other times they are tentatively accepted. As the weight of experience grows, however, the attitude of the common world towards uncommon proposals and untried initiatives becomes wary, sceptical, and negative. It simply becomes harder and harder to find something truly new; also, there can be long-term consequences to an initially attractive

suggestion that detract from or compromise the first impression. Most of the good things in life have already been discovered.

Discussions of taking away life as a judicial punishment - even for murder - are tricky for several reasons. First, there is the worry that a request for this punishment stems from emotion or a desire for revenge. Might we not be applying the principle of 'an eye for an eye' too literally or conveniently - simply because we don't know any other or better? Secondly, following this principle will in no way bring back the initial victim. If this punishment does nothing to restore the lost party, does not having recourse to it begin to appear both useless and barbaric? Aren't we just 'piling up bodies' to satisfy an abstract principle that does nothing to improve the situation for either side in the criminal offense? The problem here is that death is a unique condition, and killing someone even in what appears 'just' or 'equal' punishment, involves entering an unfamiliar and scary zone - unlike others, it is final - where humans feel out of place because radically 'out of their depth'. It is like an 'oxygen-free' zone where we don't belong. Death is the arena of our 'absolute fate'; it is perhaps for God alone there to take the reckoning.

On the other hand, doing less seems equally unacceptable. Further, the gravity of the initial act seems such that the forfeit of the guilty party's life appears not unreasonable or beyond rational consideration. After all, if he took away such a unique and all-including value from another person, the forfeit of the same value on his side would not seem to be placed beyond the scope of civilized behavior or discussion. It is a limit, but possible option. Although a radical value, it is still a this-worldly value. What makes it so different that we hesitate, or that the discussion about it becomes so intense?

All traditional cultures have made room for death as a possible punishment, and some have had recourse to it on a scale and with an absence of the delays, agonized contortions and opposition between theologians, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, social workers, judicial scholars, social activists, astrologers, new-age prophets, and trans identity activists that leaves us today amazed at our predecessors' routine efficiency. This suggests the difference is not between a 'value' which one or the other of our cultures has 'found' or 'lost'; it is rather about a sea-change between modern and traditional cultures such that the former now looks back on the latter not as an earlier version of itself, but more radically as fundamentally different - as in fact 'another planet'.

If we ask what distinguishes the modern world from the pre-modern in a way that is relevant to the issue of the death penalty, one could do worse than consider the drop in religious faith and the rise of individualism, the spread and endorsement of narcissism, as a desperate replacement and this-worldly compensation for the loss of the former and the traditional reward for a 'good life'. If there is no punishment or reward after death, our happiness in this world is all that really matters; how can we take umbrage at someone who unapologetically makes his material comfort, his financial and social success in this world his dominant objective and the chief concern of all his efforts - both those public and official as well as those hidden and clandestine? Who cares what people think about you after you are gone, if you were able to secure a pleasant and comfortable passage on this side of the 'great divide'? The early modern thinkers Spinoza and Machiavelli were able to stir up the dust and cloud the traditional vision of the theoretical sphere as

well as proper behavior in the practical sphere. After them, there doesn't seem to be much to cling to but the individual and discussion on the wisest path to secure his fortune.

A strong foundation was given to narcissism in the English tradition with the publication of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* in 1667. Milton swings the reader's sympathies towards Satan by having the poem begin just *after* the failure of the angelic revolt against God and the arrival of the new devils, to their surprise, consternation and disappointment, in hell, with some thinking that the best they could do now is to give up and beg God to be accepted back. Not so, says Satan rallying their drooping spirits, for now they should direct their rebellious, dissatisfied energies to spoiling the new tack God is taking, offering a covenant to his new creation, mankind, to replace the failed attempt and unsatisfactory outcome of that with the angelic spirits. The reader feels sorry for the despondent angels at this point, and even admires Satan for his resilient pluck and courage. He is the only one in the poem who is close to being a 'hero', and much attention is given to his psychological development and maneuvering. Not that he is constrained, as punishment for his fall, to speaking only the truth; he more than fulfills his reputation as 'prince of lies', but this is developed in an interesting way by his later effort to defend his rebellion, to distract, confuse and seduce the loyal angel Abdiel, with a spectacular denial that God even created him! In original narcissistic fashion he declares he has created himself.

That we were formed then saist thou? & the work
Of secondarie hands, by task transferred
From Father to his Son? Strange point and new!
When this creation was? Rememberst thou
Thy making, while the Maker gave thee being?
We know no time when we were not as now,
Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised
By our own quick'ning power, when fatal course
Had circled his full Orbe, the birth mature
Of this our native Heav'n, Ethereal Sons.
Our puissance is our own, our own right hand
shall teach us highest deeds, by proof to try
Who is our equal.

Bk. 5, 854-866

So Satan needs not God, even to make him! Rather, he is 'self-begot' – and why should he not go on directing himself as if he were alone, independent of God and everyone else? The reader shivers at the insolent courage of so outrageous a metaphysical claim – the first time ever made in the Western tradition! A new option is now open to the reader – to follow Satan, sympathetically but clandestinely, in his rebellion. After all, if Satan did it, so could some one else. A door has been pushed open; it is no longer taboo. And you don't have to advertise it.

The restored Stuart monarchy set a powerful example towards narcissism with James I's (1567-1625) relationship with George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham and Charles II's (1630-1685) relationship with John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester.

However, those appalled by the example of the monarchy and seeking reform seemed also unable to resist narcissism, although coming from the opposite direction. The puritan Milton had been an anti-monarchical ideologue during the English Civil War, barely escaping with his life. His poetry, and especially *Paradise Lost*, was his revenge – and a ticking time bomb – against this loss. William Blake carried on the same fight a century later at street level, and ushered in the Romantic movement. As a boy Blake spent not a single day in school; his parents recognized he was incorrigible – too independent and rambunctious to accept discipline. His manner of learning a text from his earliest years was to read a passage and then give his own spontaneous, imaginative 'translation' of what it meant to him. Originality was everything – the lone value in the universe, without which everything else was dead. 'I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man's. I will not reason and compare: my business is to create.' Milton and Blake were the creative seed of the Romantic movement; Lord Byron and Percy Shelley were its culmination and fulfillment. These latter, however, died young and ignominiously. Shelley was envious of Byron's success, and on a trip out to Italy he arranged to sail past the villa where Byron was staying to impress him. His boat capsized, however, and Shelley drowned. His body was burned on the beach the following day. Through a scandalous affair with his half-sister Augusta that produced a child, Byron was ostracized and prevented from returning to England. He fled east into revolutionary activity, culminating with his joining volunteers and local groups attempting to liberate Greece from the Turks; he died there at age 36, but the doctor could not tell whether his death was due to malaria or syphilis.

In one sense narcissism could not accept the death penalty, because at the abstract level death represents the end of its necessary dependence on and unavoidable foundation in consciousness. However, on the concrete level narcissism could provide protection against the terrors that arise from the prospect of death – the 'anguish of being extinguished', put out like a light, simply vanishing, or being stepped on like an insect. There are diverse forms of narcissism – not simply the pursuit of power, wealth, or political and social influence, but any 'mono-maniacal' point of view that proposes a single reality that swells and comes to include the entire universe – Capitalism, Marxism, Freudianism – also the strongly religious points of view, as well as any philosophical or psychological theory that the 'convert' thinks will explain everything. Conversion to and participation in such an 'enthusiasm' can compensate for and push to one side anxieties that arise from dangers to our personal existence, as the 'system' bathes us in the comforting warmth of its oceanic dimensions. Even if as a humble foot-soldier we should fall, the 'Cause' itself will ultimately prevail. Against such a massive power, my paltry existence may shrink to the dimensions of a mere instrument that may either advance or impede the assured final victory of the single reality that its advocate believes is much larger – really, all there is.

Surprisingly, therefore, narcissism, as it often leads to advocacy for a particular wide-ranging ideology, may induce the individual to an acceptance of the death penalty, since he believes it will never affect him directly or the deeper cause with which he identifies; only his enemies will become its victims, as they unavoidably bow before its power. An example is King James I of England who subscribed to the theory of the 'divine right' of kings, that is, the king is on the throne directly by the will and power of God, not

indirectly through consent or endorsement by his people. Apart from its truth or falsity, James' strenuous advocacy, his embrace and implementation of this theory (together with its allowance for the death penalty) protected him psychologically before any anxieties he might have harbored that one day he might fall victim to the latter himself (as happened to the King of France in the French Revolution).

A further example is offered by the final days of the Marxist political activist Che Guevara. Che was a revolutionary guerrilla fighter all over Latin America and in Cuba under Fidel Castro. In 1967 he was captured in Bolivia by a military patrol and told he would be executed the following day. Interestingly, this information did not cause Che to fall into deep mourning or despair as others might have. He had faith in the continued progress and ultimate victory of the Revolution. The announcement did not upset or spoil his revolutionary steadiness. He was not reduced to hysterics or crushing psychological paralysis, as might have befallen others. The news seems only to have caused mild irritation rather than plunging him into a 'slough of despond.' He lamented his death in the sense that his absence would mean that it would take the Revolution a few extra days to be achieved. He was confident of its final victory, however, and this provided a consolation that relativized the personal loss most of us would have taken more seriously and felt more painfully. It reconciled him to

accept his imminent personal extinction.

Unfortunately, in a sceptical, unbelieving age like our own, few individuals have found an ideology sufficiently powerful, attractive or all-embracing enough to lead them to risk death for its further propagation and ultimate victory. They are consequently bereft of the ideological consolation to which James I and Che obtained access. They do not subscribe to a liberal theory of universal 'human rights.' They consistently if reductively operate on the assumption of the universal power of narcissistic self-seeking like their own. At the point where your narcissism bumps up against mine, there is only the question of who wins, and who loses. That is, at the point where the other's independent self-seeking begins to pose a boundary or limitation to my own victory, dominance or expansion, I reserve the right to treat him exclusively as the rival, obstacle or impediment he has become to my desires and ambitions, my unlimited self-expansion, and to re-deploy or re-vitalize the death penalty so as to remove him by any means possible. We are all only specimens of narcissism, strong or weak, victorious or not. At the point where your narcissism interferes with mine, social reality is reduced to a Hobbesian 'war of all against all' - which is what it has been all along. We ask for no deeper conversion than to re-define 'justice' as the supremacy of brute force, and to let the latter continue to decide the on-going contest.