



## *Religiousness and capital punishment*

**By John M. Benson and  
Lois Timms-Ferrara**

# Death and Life

**D**uring the past few years, the death penalty has featured prominently in the news. The Timothy McVeigh execution and cases in which DNA evidence exonerated death row inmates have highlighted aspects of the capital punishment debate. The September 11 terrorist attacks prompted hypothetical questions about capital punishment for Osama bin Laden and other terrorists.

---

*John M. Benson is managing director, Harvard Opinion Research Program at the Harvard School of Public Health. Lois Timms-Ferrara is associate director, the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. This work is supported by the Kaiser Family Foundation. The views expressed are solely those of the authors, and no official endorsement by the foundation is intended or should be inferred.*

Earlier debates raised the question of whether or not capital punishment should be thought of as a "life" issue by those who oppose abortion and physician-assisted suicide. Several religious leaders, including Pope John Paul II, who decried all three as part of a "culture of death," have opposed the death penalty on "life" grounds. Yet it is clear that many others who oppose abortion favor the death penalty.

Do Americans who are religious, regardless of religious affiliation, treat capital punishment like other life issues, especially abortion and physician-assisted suicide? And do Americans who are less religious have a different view?

**T**o address these questions, we used a "religiousness" scale designed to measure in everyday

terms (at least in the American context) how religious someone is. This scale, applied to data from the 1998 *Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University American Values Survey*, was constructed from one salience measure, "How important is religion in your own life?" and two measures of religious practice, "Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?" and "About how often do you pray?" The responses were coded, combined, and arrayed. Then the array was divided into high, medium, and low levels of religiousness.

In a few instances, we reported results from the General Social Survey (combined years 1996-2000) based on frequency of religious attendance alone, as the GSS does not regularly ask a religious salience question.

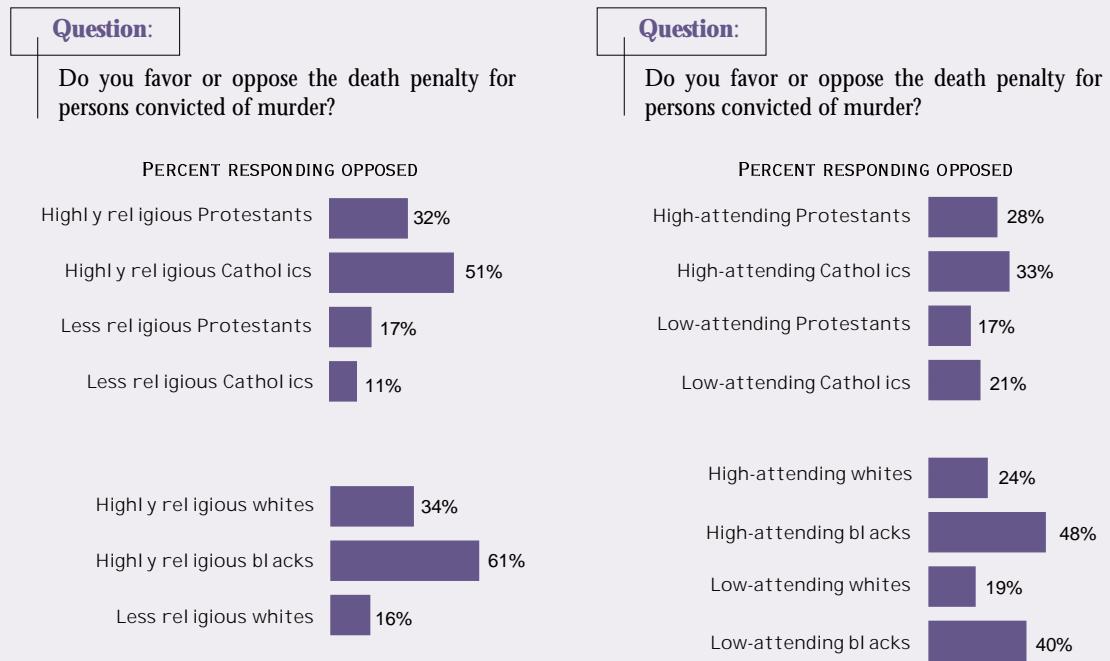
**Figure 1**  
**Opposition to Death Penalty by Religiousness**

The main measure of attitudes about the death penalty in our analysis was a standard question that has been asked in slightly varied forms since the 1950s: "Do you favor or oppose (or, alternatively, "Are you in favor of") the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?"

We chose this question because results from it are most frequently cited in news reports about public attitudes toward capital punishment. In addition, earlier research has shown that responses to it tend to track with changes in the violent crime rate nationwide. The public seems to be saying that society cannot tolerate violent crime, and "something" must be done.

That "something" may or may not be the death penalty. When respondents are offered the alternative of life imprisonment without parole—as they have been by Gallup and ABC News/*Washington Post* in five split-form experiments during the past two years—support for the death penalty is more like half (46 to 54%) than two-thirds (63 to 72%). But in well-publicized and extreme cases, such as the McVeigh execution, bin Laden and the adult suspect in the recent sniper murders, about two-thirds preferred the death penalty to life imprisonment.

Using results from the *American Values Survey*, we looked at the "pro-life" responses of various demographic groups to the standard death penalty measure—that is, responses that opposed its use—and to questions about two other "life" issues, abortion and physician-assisted suicide.



**Note:** The "religiousness" scale was created by combining responses to the following three questions: "How important is religion in your own life?" "Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?" and "About how often do you pray?"

**Source:** Survey by *Washington Post/Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University*, July 19-August 18, 1998.

**Note:** Level of church attendance was based on responses to the question, "How often do you attend religious services?"

**Source:** Surveys by National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey, 1996-2000.

The overall result for the death penalty question (69% in favor, 29% opposed) fell within the range found for that question in eleven surveys conducted in 2001 and 2002, indicating that attitudes had not changed much since 1998, when the *Valuesstudy* was done. While the differences among the groups were sometimes large, few expressed majority opposition:

- Women were significantly more likely than men to oppose the death penalty for murder (32% to 22%) and to oppose physician-assisted suicide (50% to 39%). However, men and women did not differ significantly on abortion.
- While Americans aged 65 and over were more likely than adults under 30 to oppose physician-assisted suicide (56% to 42%), the two age groups did not differ significantly on the death penalty or abortion.
- College graduates were more likely than those with a high school diploma or less to oppose the death penalty for mur-

der (34% to 25%), but less likely to consider abortion morally unacceptable and to oppose physician-assisted suicide.

- Democrats (35%) were more likely than Republicans (20%) or independents (25%) to oppose the death penalty. Republicans were more likely than Democrats or independents to consider abortion morally unacceptable. Independents were least likely to oppose physician-assisted suicide.

One of the most interesting demographics with regard to life issues was race. African Americans were much more likely than whites to oppose the death penalty (49% to 23%) and physician-assisted suicide (66% to 41%). These large differences are unsurprising given past inequities in administering capital punishment and African Americans' generally lower trust of institutions. On the other hand, white and black attitudes did not differ significantly on abortion.

The same pattern held among born-again Christians. African American

born-agains were more likely than white born-agains to oppose the death penalty (57% to 22%) and physician-assisted suicide (73% to 61%), but the groups did not differ on abortion.

A 1999 *Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard* survey of 2,417 Latinos and 2,197 non-Latinos found that Latinos were significantly more likely than non-Latino whites to oppose the death penalty (41% to 20%) and physician-assisted suicide (58% to 38%), and to think that abortion should be illegal in most or all cases (58% to 48%). Latino Catholics were also more likely than non-Latino Catholics to take a pro-life position on the death penalty (41% to 28%) and physician-assisted suicide (58% to 38%), but not on abortion.

**H**ighly religious Americans are more likely than the less religious to take pro-life positions on all three life issues. However, the difference in attitudes by religiousness is considerably muted on capital punishment when compared with abortion

and physician-assisted suicide. In fact, a majority of highly religious Americans favor the death penalty for murder.

The *Valuesurvey* found 40% of highly religious Americans opposed to the death penalty for murder, compared with only 17% of less religious Americans. The gap was considerably larger for the two other life issues, abortion (43 percentage points) and physician-assisted suicide (54 points).

Similarly, in the General Social Survey, the difference in attitudes between frequent and infrequent attenders of religious services was smaller for opposition to the death penalty (nine percentage points) than it was for opposition to abortion if the woman wants it for any reason (26 points) and euthanasia (28 points).

**T**he greater opposition to the death penalty by more religious people held true for different demographic groups as well. Highly religious men and women were more likely, respectively, than less reli-

gious men and women to oppose the death penalty. The same pattern was repeated for education. These relationships also held true on other life issues.

Highly religious Protestants and Catholics were significantly more likely than less religious members of either religious preference to oppose the death penalty (see Figure 1), even though Protestants and Catholics on the whole did not differ. A similar pattern was found in the GSS, where Catholics and Protestants who frequently attended church were more likely than their infrequently-attending counterparts to oppose capital punishment. Again, these relationships also appeared on other life issues.

[More detailed research is needed to determine whether or not religiousness has the same effect within more specific religious traditions, such as evangelical and mainline Protestantism, on attitudes about capital punishment and other life issues. Datasets that contain all the necessary ques-

Figure 2

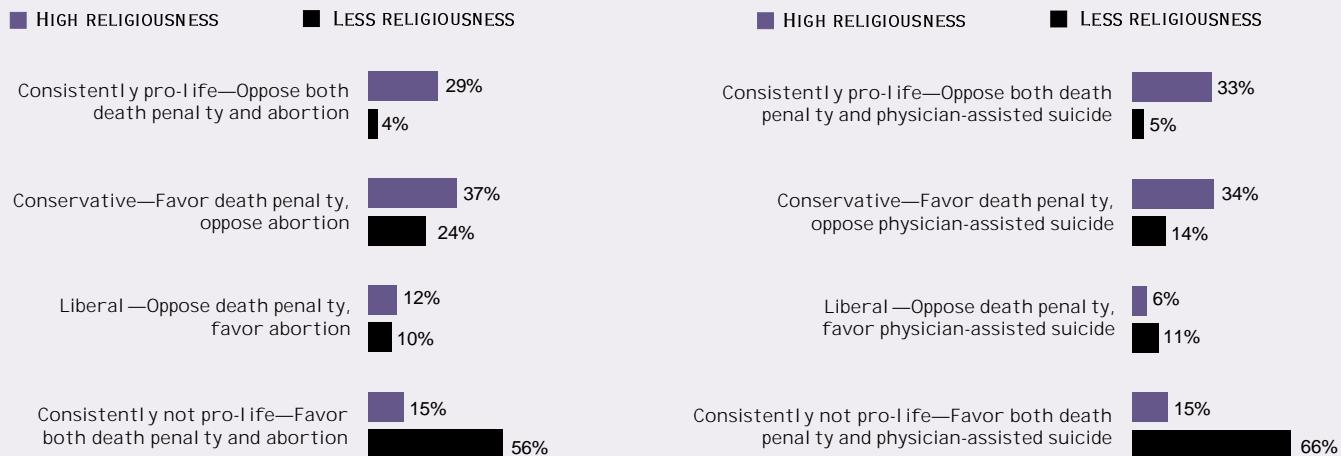
## Death Penalty and Life Issues by Religiousness

### Questions:

Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?

...[T]hinking about your own values and morals, I'd like you to tell me whether you think [abortion] is always acceptable; acceptable in some situations but not in others; unacceptable but should be tolerated by society; or unacceptable and should not be tolerated...

If someone is terminally ill, is in great pain and wants to kill themselves, should it be legal for a doctor to help them to commit suicide or not?



Note: The "religiousness" scale was created by combining responses to the following three questions: "How important is religion in your own life?" "Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?" and "About how often do you pray?"

Source: Survey by *Washington Post/Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University*, July 19-August 18, 1998.

tions are hard to find. However, the General Social Survey, which lacks a religious salience measure, contains detailed religious affiliation questions and the large sample size needed to investigate the views of various religious traditions. We hope other authors will use other combinations of GSS measures or other datasets to investigate what happens within various traditions. Such further studies should take into account the doctrinal and social teachings of the various traditions.]

Race was quite different from other demographic variables in its relationship with religiousness when it came to life issues. Highly religious African Americans in the *Values* survey were far more likely than highly religious whites (61% to 34%) to oppose the death penalty. In fact, in the combined General Social Surveys, African Americans who seldom if ever attended religious services were more likely than frequently-attending whites (40% to 24%) to oppose the death penalty.

This would seem to indicate that race is at least as important a factor as religiousness in attitudes about the death penalty. The *Values* study found that half of highly religious Catholics (51%) and a majority of highly religious African Americans (61%) opposed the death penalty.

Americans' views about the death penalty for murder are correlated with their attitudes about physician-assisted suicide (PAS) and abortion. In the *Values* study, PAS opponents were significantly more likely than PAS supporters (37% to 19%) to oppose the death penalty. Those who held a pro-life position on abortion were more likely than pro-choice Americans to oppose the death penalty (31% to 22%).

Apparently life matters, but it does not lead a very large proportion of Americans to what Joseph Cardinal Bernardin

called the "seamless garment" view of life issues. A majority of those who held a pro-life position on the other two life measures still favored the death penalty.

Figure 2, based on the *Values* survey, shows the pattern clearly. We created two variables, one combining attitudes about the death penalty and abortion, the other the death penalty and physician-assisted suicide. *Consistently not pro-life* respondents were those who favored both the death penalty and abortion or PAS; *conservatives* favored the death penalty and opposed the other; *consistently pro-life* opposed both; and *liberals* opposed the death penalty and favored the other.

Among highly religious Americans, one-third (29 to 33%) were consistently pro-life, and one-third (34 to 37%) were conservative. Only 15% were consistently not pro-life. By contrast, among less religious Americans, a majority (56 to 66%) were consistently not pro-life, while only 4 to 5% were consistently pro-life. The difference was striking, but even among highly religious Americans, the consistently pro-life position was in the minority.

Majority support for the death penalty, as well as greater opposition to abortion and physician-assisted suicide than among the less religious, seems to indicate a concern among many religious people for a traditional moral order. Indeed, just as many highly religious people fall into the (small-c) conservative as into the pro-life camp.

This concern for the traditional moral order is also reflected in conservative views on other social issues. By large margins, highly religious Americans in the *Values* survey were also more likely than less religious Americans to think homosexuality (69% to 39%) and smoking marijuana (71% to 35%) should not be tolerated by society, and to oppose divorce if a couple has young children (70% to 40%).

Relying on in-depth interviews, Kimberly J. Cook, professor of criminology at the University of Southern Maine in Portland and author of *Divided Passions: Public Opinion on Abortion and the Death Penalty*, has argued that support for the death penalty and opposition to abortion (what we call here the conservative position) are based on punitiveness. She defines this as a desire to punish those who are perceived as violating a code of ethical behavior. The data presented here lend some support to that view.

On the other hand, some have argued that capital punishment is one way of expressing respect for life by punishing those who take it. From that viewpoint, it is not surprising that some who are pro-life on other life issues support capital punishment.

In *The Death Penalty: An American History*, Stuart Banner advances a number of reasons why a majority of the public supports the death penalty. Prominent among these is what he calls a "moral imperative," regardless of whether the death penalty reduces the murder rate (which most Americans do not believe). He cites Walter Berns, who argues in *For Capital Punishment: Crime and the Morality of the Death Penalty* that the anger against murderers—often disparagingly called "revenge"—helps hold society together by reminding us of the moral order by which human beings live.

Our analysis suggests that being religious is related to at least two different ways of viewing life issues, and that life may not always be the only or even the highest value brought to bear. ●

*The authors wish to thank Abdoulaye Diop of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Melissa J. Herrmann of ICR/International Communications Research, and Kathleen Weldon of the Harvard Opinion Research Program for their assistance.*