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<http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2010/06/human_life_is_not_sacred.html>

**Human life is not sacred**

*Utah Atty. Gen. Mark Shurtleff tweeted last week's execution of convicted killer Ronnie Lee Gardner. "I just gave the go ahead to Corrections Director to proceed with Gardner's execution. May God grant him the mercy he denied his victims," Gardner (Shurtleff?) wrote in one of his controversial tweets. On Faith panelist Mathew N. Schmalz characterized the tweets as "play-by-play commentary" and wrote that "tweeting death trivializes life."*

*Was the attorney general wrong to use the popular social media tool, or religious language, to describe an execution? With all our technology, are we losing sight of our humanity? Should matters of life and death be reduced to a tweet?*

Shurtleff was not wrong to tweet an execution and include a prayer for the prisoner condemned to death, and Schmalz was wrong to protest that "tweeting death trivializes life."

1.....Deterrence being a motive in legal punishments, and publicity being a precondition of deterrence, all media should be *open* to the (societal) good news of punishments. No medium in its particularity "reduces" "matters of life and death." Is the questioner suggesting that executions should be reported only in older, and as such more dignified, media?

2.....We can agree against unpublicized executions, a common feature of dictatorships. Executions should be publicized. But how does communications technology relate to "losing sight of our humanity"? My suspicion is that the questioner is using this instance of tweeting to continue*attacking capital punishment*.
2.1
Because somebody clicked a cellphone's camera down the shaft, we got to see Saddam Husein's face seconds after his hanging. The photo proved that sight of humanity - its*concern for justice*, and its *fragility* - had not been lost. So too, last week's execution in Utah.
2.2
Forensic science, especially DNA ascertaining of guilt/innocence, has greatly reduced the possibility of the execution of an innocent. This should, but may not, increase the incidence of capital punishment. It may not, because of the spreading doctrine that this punishment violates human dignity - an ironic reversal of Genesis 9:6, which commands execution of murderers on the ground of their victims' *dignity as created in the "image of God*."
A New Testament parallel, Romans 13:1-5, says that in using the sword to maintain civil order, the government (which is instituted by God), is "God's servant." Citizens should "submit to the authorities" not only from fear of punishment but also because of "conscience."

3.....Why would anyone challenge the use of religious language by the authorizer of an execution (the traditional final phrase of a judge being "and may God have mercy on your soul")? Shurtleff's "May God grant him the mercy he denied his victims" states a *fact*(the murderer's mercilessness), a *faith*(that God "does not want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" [Second Peter 3:9]), and a *hope* (that repentance is possible in the afterlife). Love cannot be forced, and God honors the dignity of human choice. But "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17). Since Utah's Attorney General was thus honoring biblical religion, protesters may be objecting to (1) its use on the latest social-networking technology, (2) its use in connection with executions, and/or (3) its use. The objecting may be cultural and/or political and/or religious.

4.....Finally, what is this humanity some - thinking about the death penalty - fear we are losing sight of? It is not the traditional biblical *humanity-under-God*. Rather, it is*humanity as deity*, as sacred-inviolable. We should lose sight of it.

5.....This inflated view of our species has appeared in recent times as "the sanctity of human life," which is code for religion-based anti-abortion. Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms says that "Holiness and sanctity are very close synonyms." In the three states in which our children were born, we avoided hospitals known to consider the fetus more sacred - almost holy! - than the mother.

6....While human life is not sacred (that is, inviolable by execution or abortion), it is to be respected as God's most complex, innovative, and responsible creation.

**BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT  |  JUNE 23, 2010; 11:13 AM ET**

**Comments**

**Please report offensive comments below.**

TO HAVEAHEART

Thank you. And thanks for the reference to faithunboxed.org; I'll check it out.

Yes: "similarities, not differences." Similarities feed the will to work together for the good of humanity & what I call God's good earth: differences feed the will to disagree, to fight, to war. But this either/or is simplistic, unrealistic. Our differences are precisely what we must face as we live out our convictions; & it's a dangerous romanticism (a grandmotherly "Children, don't fight")to believe that the deep differences can be shelved in the interest of "one world." (My first comment to HAVEAHEART was "have a mind.")

Your religion is (whatever else you may call it) reverence for (bio-)life. The dissertation of my first earned doctorate was "LIFE in the Fourth Gospel: An Illustration of a Comprehensive Interpretive Methodology." A student (with no Christian background) in a university in China has just submitted to her professor (a son of ours) her concluding essay on a theme of her choice, namely, "logos" in the first chapter of the Fourth Gospel (John), which (she concluded) contains the Christian Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Read John 1: see what you think. The fourth verse says "In him (the Logos-Word, Jesus) was life, and that life was the light of men."

I accused you of being "compassion-swamped." Christianity does not reduce life to bio-life, & itself is not reducible to compassion.

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | JULY 5, 2010 1:48 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

"I hope you're not too offended when I close with 'God bless you!'"

Not at all, Mr. Elliott. Rejecting someone's personal good wishes serves no purpose, and I think your sentiments are genuine.

In fact, I don't leave "God" out of the equation; I just understand that entity very differently than you do.

There's an interesting new blog going on that uses the "On Faith" feature as a jumping-off point. It's called "Faith Unboxed," and it's a discussion among people who know themselves as people of faith but do not ascribe to the mainstream definitions of "God." You might find it an interesting discussion. Site: faithunboxed.org.

Thank you for engaging with me in this conversation. One thing I have learned about you is that you look for similarities, not differences, among people, and that is a trait often lacking in organized religion.

**POSTED BY: HAVEAHEART | JUNE 30, 2010 11:19 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

TO HAVEAHEART

You write well, and I agree with much that you say.

Interesting, is it not, that we agree life is not "sacred," but (my section 6) to be "respected." Ironic, too: our worldviews are so different that we agree neither on the meaning of "sacred" nor on the motive for "respected."

My father was a NY judge, and I am liberal in most of the ways you are. But I am also an evangelical Christian. My "libergelical" language leaves you as uncomfortable as your leaving out God leaves me.

I hope you're not too offended when I close with "God bless you!"

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | JUNE 29, 2010 11:01 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Mr. Elliott,

You're still trying to pigeonhole me as a thinker. For some reason you're uncomfortable unless the bug is pinned down on the board.

We may both be pro-choice, but we have a very different understanding of what that means. For you, it is a "pro-death" stance -- one that you are apparently willing to support. I cannot agree, however, because, as I explained, I don't view an embryo as anything more than a clutch of dividing cells.

So, no, I am not "pro-death" in any circumstance, and the anti-abortionists will certainly call me hypocritical. But then, I see them as hypocritical in their crusade for the rights of unborn, embryonic cells which turns to utter disinterest once a baby is born into the hopeless circumstances of poverty, hunger, and violence.

You are right that I see no justice in the execution of another person, regardless of his crimes -- only a childish tit-for-tat kind of vengeance. I do believe that we diminish ourselves by meting out as punishment the very crime we are condemning. This doesn't mean, however, that I am opposed to punishment. Frankly, it seems to me that being forced to live -- and look forward to -- a restricted, miserable existence in prison for the rest of one's life would be a far worse sentence than execution.

If these beliefs make me "compassion-swamped," then I'll take it as a compliment. I must say, though, that I never expected to hear a "man of God" argue against the quality of compassion.

As it happens, I am opposed to killing animals for food -- or for any other purpose. I am opposed to using their products, as well. I reject the notion that sentient beings don't experience pain the way humans do.

You say, "My impression is that to you, life - animal life, including human life - is sacred, inviolable by human killing (except in the case of preborn humans)."

In fact, I regard life not as "sacred" but as something to be respectful of and something that I have no right to destroy. As for the "preborn humans," you already know my position -- embryos are neither humans nor sentient.

As for your second-floor/third-floor analogies, which I confess I cannot understand, all I can tell you is that, to me, it is the doors and windows that are far more important than the number of floors and their relative hierarchy.

Seeing out, contemplating what is there, and welcoming it in are the spiritual opportunities I see in any comforting enclosure. In a threatening enclosure, those same windows and doors provide the opportunity for escape. I have no need of a cramped, hot, and stuffy attic if my two floors are properly equipped for arriving and leaving and coming home again.

**POSTED BY: HAVEAHEART | JUNE 29, 2010 11:53 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Rev. Elliot,

I confess I would have thought you opposed capital punishment.

On this I agree: "My suspicion is that the questioner is using this instance of tweeting to continue attacking capital punishment."

As for technological developments reducing the number of innocents executed, the risk of one is far too great a risk for us to take, and there is little doubt that we have "executed" guiltless persons.

There is no evidence that capital punishment deters anyone from doing anything.

On the Commandment. The Commandment, as you say, states, "Thou shalt not murder." It is for this reason that Israel does not have the death penalty. Only one man has been executed in the history of the nation, and no other will be.

**POSTED BY: FARNAZ\_MANSOURI2 | JUNE 28, 2010 7:05 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

TO HAVEAHEART

Sorry! I caused your confusion when I wrote "We are pro-life....": I meant "pro-choice."
Your response indicates that, indeed, we (you and I) are pro-choice, which means (to the aborted) "pro-death." The pro-life advocates would accuse you of hypocrisy: for being FOR the killing of innocents & AGAINST killing murderers.

Your rejection of the death penalty is so absolute that you can see no justice in (e.g.) the execution of Saddam H. - no justice, only vengeance. More evidence that you are (as I said in my second sentence to you) (haveaheart) "compassion-swamped." In his legal principle of equivalence (eye-for-an-eye, etc.), Hammurabi was concerned to remove "lex talionis" (as the Romans later called it)from the chaos of private life up into the cosmos of public life: the state will see that justice is done & that the rectification is not overdone (e.g., two eyes for one); or (contra tribal law) only the murderer is executed, not his whole family. You give H. no credit for either an advance in public order on an egalitarian base nor for the humanitarian element in his motivation.

I'm confused by your being "opposed to the intentional killing of non-human animals": for food as well as for sport? You are opposed to the intentional killing of humans: in war as well as by capital punishment? You say that you agree with my title, "Human life is not sacred"; but my impression is that to you, life - animal life, including human life - is sacred, inviolable by human killing (except in the case of preborn humans).

For you, justice is a TWO-floor (individual-private + societal-public) question. Biblically, it is THREE-floor, with "the Judge of all the earth" on the third floor. You prefer to live without the third floor, in the "cribbed, cabinned,
and confined" space of two floors. This intentional restriction, in my opinion, constricts the imaginal and intellectual possibilities of the human drama.

Being willfully blind to the third floor, you consider "blind" those of us who - on the basis of three-floor thinking - disagree with you. But I'm sorry you used the word, & I am uncomfortable using it after you: it is so arrogant.

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | JUNE 28, 2010 4:05 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

elliottwl,

Delighted to know I've riled you up.

In truth, I don't understand much of your rambling about "pro-death" and "anti-death." However, in response to your comment "We are pro-life (well, aren't you?)," I will simply respond by saying that I am pro-choice on the issue of abortion, because I don't believe that an embryo is anything more than a tiny bunch of dividing cells within a woman's body over which said woman has sole discretion.

Conversely, capital punishment is the taking of human life in the ancient Hammurabi tradition of eye-for-an-eye vengeance. Not justice; vengeance.

My perspectives here are not based on any assessment of human life as sacred. I am equally opposed to the intentional killing of non-human animals. As regards capital punishment, I believe that none of us is "perfect" enough to decide that another human should die for his crimes. That is the worst kind of hubris -- to believe we are capable of making decisions about whether another should live or die. To believe we should do this is the supreme and ultimate form of arrogance.

No, Mr. Elliott, we aren't so similar as you've opined. I see you as a blind man leading other blind people in your hateful campaign to return execution to the village square -- metaphorically if not literally.

**POSTED BY: HAVEAHEART | JUNE 28, 2010 12:18 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

2 twitted tales of religious humanism.

saint georgio the american humanist invaded iraq carrying on his head and shoulder the american religious humanism (the juchristian bible and the democratic humanism bible)

the job accomplished on the killed and stranded body of more than 5 millions human life more than the arabism humanism sadam accomplished thru his entire system life???????

who is right and who is wrong ?who,s mind is right and who,s mind is wrong,who,s system is right and who,s system is wrong,who is ideologicaly right and who is ideologicaly wrong ,who is human and who is not????

both are no less delusional than the other both are no less bloody than the other both fail nations and mankind.

nothing fail nations and mankind like hypocrisy especialy academics heads who not only failed in religion but also in humanism.

**POSTED BY: MONO1 | JUNE 27, 2010 4:42 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

TO HAVEAHEART

Have a HEAD. Your thinking is compassion-swamped with what you call "20th- and 21st-century values," with which you are in "sync," & claim that I am not.

Not so fast! We share more values than you think. We are pro-life (well, aren't you?), which means pro-death to unborns the mother (for some reason) doesn't want born. But you are not pro-death to murderers, as I am. Indeed, you make a huge thing of being anti-death to criminals.

As for deterrence, what I said was "Deterrence being s motive in legal punishments." That is a statement of fact: read the laws. What is illegal deters the public mind, though of course "no criminal expects to get caught." You are horrified at the death penalty: the public conscience is pro-legal, and horrified at the thought of being caught and killed by the government. Your comment on deterrence relates only to actual murderers.

Since you are dogmatically opposed to the death penalty, you can see no public benefit in the photo of Saddam dead. That photo spelled finis to the Baathist hope of his return to power. It was the visual closure of a rule-by-murder dictatorship.

As for my being "an OT preacher," my University of Chicago PhD is in NT, with a
dissertation involving motivation research.

Your thinking, as godless, is "out of syn" with most Americans and with American history. For you, the sacred has collapsed into humanity, so you are offended by my title, "Human life is not sacred." Religious humanism is widespread in the West, and many of its devotees are fundamentalists on the left.

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | JUNE 26, 2010 11:41 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Willis E. Elliott

You wrote, "While human life is not sacred (that is, inviolable by execution or abortion), it is to be respected as God's most complex, innovative, and responsible creation."

Rather interesting that you say, "most complex, innovative, and responsible creation" and also point to "biblical verses" in your post and yet leave out a verse from Page I, which a lot of people seem to ignore, "Let Us make man in Our Image".

The "man" in the above quotation refers to ALL OF HUMANITY, not just to some.

Just because we do not "live up" to that Image does not negate Page I, does it?

Could this be a reason for God to have had a Plan since before creation and God becoming One of us as being a "Part" of that Plan?

Many, many people have tried to cram God into a "box", including the "bible box", God will not fit into any of our "boxes".

Some people speak of Jesus as being the "Saviour of the world", either He is or He isn't, but quite a few of those that speak the above phrase do not mean it at all, if questioned about it, what they mean is that Jesus is the Saviour of some, of course this "some" includes them.

As I have said, God's Plan is for ALL to be in God's Kingdom, God wins, satan loses, a tie is absolutely and utterly unacceptable.

See you and the rest of humanity in the Kingdom.

Take care, be ready.

Sincerely, Thomas Paul Moses Baum.

**POSTED BY: THOMASBAUM | JUNE 26, 2010 10:54 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Mr. Elliott's position in this debate is a sad bit of theater in a world that, by and large, no longer pays any attention to his kind. He is so out of sync with 20th- and 21st-century values that he embarrasses himself by revealing how little he knows about contemporary culture.

"Deterrence being a motive in legal punishments..."

Right off, the premise here is faulty. Capital punishment does not deter criminals any more than a life sentence does. The brutal truth is that criminals aren't swayed by the possibility of punishment because...(drumroll)...

no criminal expects to get caught.

Criminals tend to be narcissistic or sociopathic; they define themselves in terms that do not admit of failure. They are grandiose or quietly "superior," but they don't tend to be logical, rational thinkers.

Consequently, for the worst offenders especially (murderers, rapists, drug lords), "deterrence" is a laughable concept.

Mr. Elliott also seems very enthusiastic about the value of displaying society's punishments as a lesson to those who would go down the wrong path. To this end, he deems the post-death photo of Saddam Hussein a service to the public. Perhaps he would also support the display of severed heads on pikes in the village square? They, too, sent a message.

"My suspicion is that the questioner is using this instance of tweeting to continue attacking capital punishment."

Horrors! A man of faith arguing against the morality of "killing in kind" as a viable means of societal punishment. Somehow I don't think Jesus would have been ok with capital punishment. Keep in mind that the words of the NT quotation came not from Jesus' mouth but from that of one of his many agenda-driven biographers.

"Why would anyone challenge the use of religious language by the authorizer of an execution...?"

Because the religious language being used co-opted the whole scenario as being Christian. Maybe Gardner wasn't Christian. Maybe he didn't want anyone praying on his behalf. If the attorney general felt the need to say these words in order to assuage his own guilt or discomfort, then he should have said them privately and quietly.

Clearly Mr. Elliott is one of that old school brand of Old Testament preachers who haven't examined their beliefs or their consciences since ordination.

Maybe it's time to start?

**POSTED BY: HAVEAHEART | JUNE 25, 2010 11:42 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

"Executions should be publicized.." like funerals of our fallen soldiers should be hounded with anti-gay protests from his inbred Baptist cousin Fred Phelps.

**POSTED BY: AREYOUSAYING | JUNE 25, 2010 11:31 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Elliottwl,

I only offered evidence about moral progress in regard to death penalty opposition because that was the topic at hand. In general, I would say the legal guarantees of equality and civil rights for women and minorities are big indicators of progress. As far as deterrence goes, yes, the offender himself is preventing from re-offending, but a sentence of life without parole achieves the same thing. Typically, when one mentions the deterrence value of a punishment, the effect on potential offenders is what is meant, and there is good data showing that the execution of killers doesn't deter other would-be murderers.

To speak more about moral progress, the enactment of labor laws and intellectual property laws have done a great deal to shape modern life for average people. Likewise, the protection of basic civil rights for gays is a good sign. We in the West are finally starting to talk about the right to end one's own life. I realize you probably don't agree with me on those points, but those are the types of indicators of progress I meant. To me and many other people, they are signs that more and more people are realizing that everyone possesses innate human dignity, particularly those groups who have been mistreated or marginalized in the past.

Most religions have had to find new ways to reinterpret their scriptures to include these changing understandings of morality. For instance, few modern Christians would believe that slavery is appropriate or moral, despite its many mentions in the Bible.

As you said, I do not believe in any god or gods. I believe that human dignity comes from the state of being human, not from an outside source.

**POSTED BY: CIANWN | JUNE 23, 2010 11:14 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

TO CIANWN

So this is "an era of moral progress"? The evidence you offer is the growing opposition (in some places on the planet) to capital punishment.

Death-penalty deterrence of crime is 100% in the cases of the executed. In the U.S., the death penalty has become so improbable that there's little fear of it.
The fact that some studies in a few demographics show a correlation of a high murder rate with a high execution rate does not necessarily disprove deterrence; some interpreters have seen the high execution rate as keeping the high murder rate lower than it otherwise would be.

You & I differ most in our relational understanding of humanity. I see basic human dignity in our species' origin in and responsibility to God as understood in the American heritage. For you, it seems, that relationship does not exist.

**POSTED BY: ELLIOTTWL | JUNE 23, 2010 4:48 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

I find Pastor Elliot's defense of the tweeting a bit legalistic, and naive. The Utah attorney general is, in my opinion, using these tweets as part of the culture war over capitol punishment. It also communicates to his followers/voters that the AG is "tough on crime," but a merciful believer because he included a prayer. Yes, an execution should be wittnessed by the media, and reported with a simple statment or news release to all audiences. It should not be dramatized for political purposes to a selective audience of followers/supporters. I can't proof-text my visceral distaste to the tweeting, but I do think politicians should refrain from using an execution to gain popularity as it appears happened here. Nothing Christian about that!

**POSTED BY: OUTRAGEX | JUNE 23, 2010 2:04 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

I'm severely disappointed in Mr. Elliot's comments and his apparent lack of research. In his first point, the writer claims that publicizing the death penalty via Twitter is acceptable because of its "deterrent effect". If he'd bother to do any research on that statement, Mr. Elliot would discover that the oft-touted "deterrence" he attributes to the death penalty does not actually exist.

With regard to point #2, this is a matter of the public view of media like Twitter. While some individuals use Twitter to communicate on a personal level (like Congressmen talking about votes on a bill or views on current events), we don't see state-sanctioned spokesmen using it in their official roles. There are well-established channels for communicating the occurrence of an execution to the media.

Finally, I'm mystified that in an era of moral progress, the writer is still citing brutal, bloody ancient scriptures to twist morality into justifying execution on grounds that human dignity demands it. Your argument is false and disgusting, Mr. Elliot, and it has no place in the modern world.

**POSTED BY: CIANWN | JUNE 23, 2010 1:40 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

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