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God Imagery and Opposition to Abortion and Capital Punishment: A Partial Test of Religious Support for the Consistent Life Ethic*

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Abortion and the death penalty are two of the most contentious issues in American public life. Previous scholarship has documented religious variations in attitudes toward each of these hotly contested issues. However, scant research has explored how religious factors affect opposition to both abortion and capital punishment, two key elements of a consistent life ethic. This study offers a partial test of religious support for the consistent life ethic by examining the extent to which the nature and quality of the relationship between God and the religious believer fosters opposition to both abortion and capital punishment. Using data from the 2004 General Social Survey, we find that a close relationship with a loving God predicts opposition to both abortion and the death penalty net of other religious factors and covariates. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings and delineating promising directions for future research.

Key words: religion; abortion; capital punishment; death penalty; god image; consistent life ethic.

INTRODUCTION

Views about abortion and the death penalty remain central to debates over public policy (Fried 1988; Mouw and Sobel 2001; Welch et al. 1995).

Religiosity has been shown to influence attitudes toward abortion (Ellison et al. 2005; Gay and Lynxwiler 1999; Hertel and Hughes 1987; Jelen and Wilcox 2003) as well as support for the death penalty (Grasmick and McGill 1994; Jacobs et al. 2005; Stack 2003; Young 1992; Young and Thompson 1995). With only a few exceptions, however, these streams of research have developed largely as parallel literatures.

Our study examines the degree to which Americans express attitudinal opposition to both abortion and capital punishment, given that both of these actions deal directly with the state endorsing the taking of life. Our investigation extends previous research by highlighting the nature and quality of a believer's relationship to a loving God as a potential source of attitudinal consistency on these issues. We hypothesize that Americans who have a close relationship with a loving God will be more likely to oppose both abortion and the death penalty.

This investigation has clear implications for the study of what has been called the "consistent life ethic." Advanced most strongly by the Catholic Church, this ethic embraces the view that life should be preserved under all, or nearly all, circumstances. The consistent life ethic thus endorses the protection of human life through opposition to abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia, stem cell research, and war (Hipsher 2007). Regrettably, extant national data sets do not allow us to examine the potential impact of holding a loving image of God on support for the preservation of life across all of these outcomes. However, as noted, we are able to examine the impact of respondents' image of God on two essential elements of the consistent life ethic, namely, abortion and capital punishment.

A careful examination of attitudes toward these two issues in tandem is important for three reasons. First, other scholars have seen abortion and the death penalty as the core elements of a consistent life ethic (Perl and McClintock 2001), and our examination of the influence of God imagery on these issues augments prior inquiries. Second, both policies require an ongoing, explicit decision by the state to approve the end of life. Third, these issues are policy matters on which there is likely to be political inconsistency, with liberals and conservatives holding pro-life and anti-life positions but in opposite directions (i.e., liberals favoring abortion but opposing the death penalty and conservatives *vice versa*). Holding a consistent life ethic thus requires individuals to move beyond political ideology to favor the protection of life in both instances. We seek to determine if a loving image of God is connected to a consistent life ethic.

THE CONSISTENT LIFE ETHIC: PRIOR RESEARCH AND LACUNAE

A consistent life ethic has attracted some scholarly attention since it initially entered the public lexicon (Kelly and Kudlac 2000; Jelen 1988; McNair and Zunes 2008; Mulligan 2006; Perl and McClintock 2001). This concept was first

publicly introduced through Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's Gannon Lecture at Fordham University (Bernardin 1983). Since that time, others have expanded on this perspective, with Cardinal William H. Keeler identifying "God's creative and sustaining love for every human being" as "the one sure source of human dignity and freedom. [God's] love for us is the fundamental reason why every human life must be valued and defended" (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops 2005a). In the parlance of many Catholic leaders, this interpretive framework operates as a "seamless garment" (Cleghorn 1986; Welch and Legge 1991). Individuals with a consistent life ethic are therefore expected to oppose both the death penalty and abortion because both acts use modern technology intentionally to end human life (Perl and McClintock 2001).

Polling data show that a substantial majority of Americans (65–70 percent) *support* capital punishment for convicted murderers (Unnever et al. 2008). Surveys also indicate that a majority of Americans (in 1998 about 59 percent) report that they *oppose* abortion for various reasons (Kelly and Kudlac 2000). A minority of Americans oppose both capital punishment and abortion, which are two key elements of a consistent life ethic (Perl and McClintock 2001). The minority status of this viewpoint is understandable given the liberal-conservative fissure in American politics (Perl and McClintock 2001; Sawyer 1982). Moreover, abortion attitudes do not significantly predict support for the death penalty (Granberg and Granberg 1980; Sawyer 1982; Tamney et al. 1992). Nevertheless, minority viewpoints such as a consistent life ethic provide an intriguing opportunity for social scientific investigation. Understanding the social sources of these worldviews can reveal the circumstances under which deviation from dominant norms occurs and can highlight the prospects for dissent to foment social change.

Early research on the consistent life ethic investigated whether opposition to abortion and capital punishment could be traced to students' conceptualizations of life ownership, that is, views that life belongs to God, the state, or the self (Ross and Kaplan 1993). Ross and Kaplan (1993) hypothesized that God-oriented individuals (those who believe that only God has the right to give and take life) should have a consistent life ethic that allows them to oppose both abortion and the death penalty. Individuals classified as God-oriented were less accepting of abortion than their individual-oriented peers, while those embracing a state-oriented life conception scale were more supportive of capital punishment. Unfortunately, Ross and Kaplan's (1993) methodology did not permit them to explore whether defining life as belonging to God predicted attitudes toward both abortion and the death penalty after controlling for other factors.

More recent research has examined denominational support for a consistent life ethic. Tamney et al. (1992) found higher levels of support for various defense of life positions among Catholics, while Perl and McClintock (2001) found agreement with a consistent life ethic to be most pervasive among Catholics (11.6 percent), followed by conservative Protestants (8.2 percent) and mainline Protestants (5.8 percent). Consistent with an ideological

exposure explanation, the effect of abortion attitudes on support for the death penalty was most pronounced among Catholics who attended religious services often (Perl and McClintock 2001; see also Bjarnason and Welch 2004), although significant effects were also observed for mainline Protestants. More recently, Mulligan (2006) analyzed four surveys and found that individuals who viewed Pope John Paul II favorably were significantly more likely to oppose capital punishment and abortion.

Our goal is to move beyond a preoccupation with the denominational bases of a consistent life ethic. Scholars have begun to recognize that public opinion about social issues is shaped by God images (Bader and Froese 2005; Froese and Bader 2007, 2008; Unnever et al. 2006; Welch and Leege 1991). Indeed, the nature and quality of the believer–deity relationship is now recognized as a critical influence on a variety of social attitudes, including support for the death penalty and abortion (Bader and Froese 2005; Froese and Bader 2008; Unnever et al. 2006). For example, Unnever et al. (2006) have identified two interrelated dimensions of believers' relationship with God to be considered when investigating the influence of religious convictions on public opinion: (1) the *intimacy or proximity* that characterizes the believer's relationship with God (i.e., believer's sense of closeness or nearness to God), and (2) the *experiential quality* of the believer–deity relationship (i.e., the experience of God's love in the believer's life) (see also, Bader and Froese 2005). Together, these components form what these researchers call a "close relationship with a loving God" construct.

Why might a close relationship with a loving God create a cognitively consistent schema with respect to capital punishment and abortion? Turning first to capital punishment, previous scholarship has confirmed that people who have a close relationship with a loving God oppose the death penalty because they are inclined to view God's love as unconditional and characterized by mercy for wayward persons (Unnever et al. 2006). In fact, the effects of an individual's perceived relationship with God rivals that of political orientation, long recognized as one of the most formidable influences on death penalty views. Relatedly, Froese and Bader (2008) analyzed the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) and found that individuals who perceive God to be authoritarian (God as king, father, judge, and master) were more likely to support the death penalty.

Turning to abortion, research has revealed that Catholics and Conservative Protestants are more opposed to abortion (Ellison et al. 2005; Granberg and Granberg 1980; Legge 1983; Petersen 2001; Sullins 1999; Wilcox 1992), as are those who attend worship services frequently (see e.g., Ellison et al. 2005; Gay and Lynxwiler 1999; Harris and Mills 1985; Jelen and Wilcox 2003; Legge 1983; Wilcox 1992). The influence of God images on abortion attitudes has received less attention, but fruitful results have surfaced. Opposition to abortion among Catholic laypersons is connected with images of God as "judge" and "savior" as well as closeness to God (Welch and Leege 1988). Moreover, those who hold an authoritarian and activist (involved) view of God are more likely to oppose abortion (Bader and Froese 2005; see also Froese and Bader 2008).

Our research extends prior inquiries by exploring the influence of God images on two key elements of the consistent life ethic, namely, opposition to both abortion and capital punishment. We hypothesize that individuals who report having a close relationship with a loving God will exhibit a life-affirming worldview in which God is seen as the only legitimate giver and taker of life. While these attitudes are consistent with the official position of the Catholic Church (see U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops 2005a, 2005b), prior research on the influential nature of God imagery leads us to expect that the overriding influence of a personal relationship with a loving God will eclipse the effects of denominational affiliation and other religious factors.

METHODS

Research Strategy and Data

Using 2004 GSS data, we first examine whether Americans who have a close relationship with a loving God are more likely to oppose the death penalty. Second, we investigate whether opposition to abortion is significantly associated with having a close relationship with a loving God. Third, we construct a measure that identifies individuals who oppose both abortion and capital punishment, that is, those who exhibit support for a consistent life ethic (as defined here) and regress it on our close relationship with a loving God construct. In all analyses, we control for other religious factors and covariates commonly used in previous studies. Finally, we examine whether the relationship between support for a consistent life ethic and having a close relationship with a loving God varies across denominational affiliations.

The 2004 GSS is a full-probability sample of U.S. adults living in households conducted by in-person interviews. These data offer expanded measures of religiosity (e.g., God imagery) and are generalizable to the non-institutionalized adult American population, thus eclipsing single-state or single-denomination studies (e.g., Applegate et al. 2000; Perl and McClintock 2001; Welch and Leege 1988, 1991). The 2004 GSS is also larger and more diverse (racially and economically) than other studies (e.g., Applegate et al. 2000; Sandys and McGarrell 1997; Vogel and Vogel 2003). The GSS included the death penalty question on three ballots, while the abortion attitude measures we use were included on two ballots. Consequently, the sample includes respondents who answered both questions.[1] The total number of cases available for analyses prior to listwise deletion of the missing cases was 808. Our study sample is 667.

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[1]Data limitations prohibited us from investigating a more expansive definition of a consistent life ethic (Bernadin 1983; McNair and Zunes 2008). Opposition to euthanasia, asked of only one quarter of the GSS respondents, in combination with abortion and the death penalty measures, reduces our sample size so significantly that meaningful analyses could not be conducted.

Dependent Variables

Oppose death penalty Respondents were asked whether they favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder. The response categories included "favor," "oppose," and "don't know." A dichotomous measure, *Oppose Death Penalty* (1 = oppose 0 = other), was constructed. In the 2004 GSS, 32 percent of the respondents reported that they opposed the use of the death penalty for persons convicted of murder.[2]

Oppose abortion Following previous research (e.g., Bader and Froese 2005), we constructed a scale (*Oppose Abortion*) that sums across the extent to which abortion is wrong under different circumstances. Respondents were prompted with the query: "Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion." The six questions are: (1) "If there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby?"; (2) "If she is married and does not want any more children?"; (3) "If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children?"; (4) "If she became pregnant as a result of rape?"; (5) "If she is not married and does not want to marry the man?"; and (6) "The woman wants it for any reason." The response categories were: "yes," "no," and "don't know." We coded individuals who opposed abortion across all six circumstances as 1. Those who supported abortion under one or more circumstances and those who responded "don't know" were coded 0. To assess the validity of this scale, we generated a principal component factor analysis on a tetrachoric correlation matrix of these six binary items. This principal component analysis generated one factor, with factor loadings ranging from 0.87 to 0.97.[3]

Consistent life ethic We constructed a measure of whether respondents had a consistent life ethic (as defined in our study) by identifying those who opposed both the death penalty and abortion across all six conditions (coded 1, all others coded 0).

Key Independent Variable: Close Relationship with a Loving God

We replicated the *close loving God* index constructed by Unnever et al. (2006) by summing across responses to seven 2004 GSS items. Two items measure the degree to which respondents experienced God as a loving

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[2]There were 68 "don't know" responses on the death penalty question (CAPPUN). All were included in the "other" category. A consistent life ethic would lead to death penalty opposition.

[3]Individuals who answered "don't know" on the abortion questions were also included in the "other" category, because individuals who endorse a consistent life ethic would affirm their opposition to abortion. "Don't know" responses ranged from 3.9 percent on ABANY (abortion on demand) to 2.2 percent on ABSINGLE (is single and does not want to marry the man). We also constructed a depth of opposition measure using abortion items by summing across the six questions related to the conditions under which abortions are commonly sought ($\alpha = 0.80$). We regressed this index on our image of God measure while controlling for the other independent variables and it significantly predicted opposition to abortion ($\beta = 0.177$, $p = .01$).

deity: (1) "I feel God's love for me, through others" and (2) "I feel God's love for me, directly." Five items assessed closeness to God: (1) "I feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities"; (2) "In general, how close do you feel to God?"; (3) "I feel God's presence"; (4) "I ask for God's help in the midst of daily activities"; and (5) "During worship, or at other times when connecting with God, I feel joy which lifts me out of my daily concerns." The standardized alpha coefficient for the Close Loving God index was 0.94.

Given previous scholarship on the complexity of God imagery (Froese and Bader 2007, 2008), we assessed whether the items we used to construct our Close Loving God index load on two separate dimensions: closeness to God, and perceptions of God's love. Our factor analysis of the seven items generated a single factor (sub-index correlation = 0.89). Moreover, both sub-indices are similarly correlated with opposition to abortion (closeness = 0.41, loving = 0.38) and capital punishment (closeness = 0.14, loving = 0.11). Our scale represents a valid construct.

Other Predictor Variable: Religion Measures and Covariates

We controlled for the effect of various religious variables and other measures that have been found to be associated with support for either capital punishment or abortion, including *religious attendance* ("How often do you attend religious services?" coded as 0 = "never" to 7 = "several times a week"), *prayer* ("About how often do you *pray?*" reverse-coded so that 1 = "less than once a week" and 5 = "several times a day"), *biblical literalism* ("The Bible is the actual word of God and it is to be taken literally, word for word" coded as 1, all others coded 0), *denominational attachment* (self-stated strength of affiliation, with response categories reverse-coded, ranging from "no religion" to "strong"), denominational affiliation (RELTRAD classifications (Steensland et al. 2000) namely, *Catholic, Black Protestant, Conservative Protestant, Jewish, other religions, unaffiliated,* and *Mainline Protestant* [last as reference category]), and *religious transformation* (1 = any transformation [new and personal commitment to religion, life-changing religious or spiritual experience, born-again experience], 0 = no transformation at all) used by Smith (2005).

Given the potential links between altruism and closeness to a loving God, we constructed a nine-item summed index, *altruism* ($\alpha = 0.758$, all load on single factor) gauging, for example, donations of food or money to the homeless and offering a seat to a stranger in the past year. Higher values on *altruism* indicate less altruistic attitudes. Given previous research on the influence of *political conservatism* on public policy attitudes (e.g., Applegate et al. 2000) we use a self-identifier to tap this measure (scale of 1–7, "extremely conservative" as maximum value). Because prior research has traced how support for the death penalty and opposition to abortion can be linked through the "just desserts" perspective (Cook 1998; Wiecko and Gau 2008), we control for *punitiveness* ("In general, do you think the courts in this area deal too harshly or not

harshly enough with criminals?" 1 = "too harshly," 2 = "about right," and 3 = "not harshly enough").

Among other controls commonly related to support for punitive crime control policies or abortion (see e.g., Ellison et al. 2005; Gay and Lynxwiler 1999; Jelen and Wilcox 2003; Unnever and Cullen 2005, 2006; Unnever et al. 2005), we included a measure of race, *African American* (1 = African American, 0 = other) and a variable, *Southerner* (1 = southerner, 0 = all others) that assessed whether respondents resided in the South when they were 16 years old and were living in the South when the interview was conducted. We also controlled for gender (*male* = 1), *age* (measured in years), and family *income* through a GSS summary scale ranging from 1 to 13 (minimum = "under $1,000," the maximum = "$110,000 or over"). We additionally control for the respondent's marital status (currently *married* = 1, others = 0).

Preliminary analyses showed that the relationship between support for the death penalty and education was not linear, revealing it to be a step function. Thus, people with post-high school education were significantly more likely to oppose capital punishment and no discernible effects were found among those with less than a post-high school educational experience. We therefore measured the respondent's level of education by creating a binary variable, *college*, (1 = post-high school education, 0 = other). Lastly, we control for fear of crime, that is, whether respondents reported being "afraid to walk alone at night" (1 = yes, 0 = no).

Analytical Strategy

We used binary logistic regression to analyze our dependent variables. Listwise deletion of missing data was used for all variables excluding income; missing data on income were replaced with its mean. The weighted sample was used (WTSSALL). In Table 1, we present standardized logistic regression coefficients and their corresponding odds ratios.

RESULTS

We begin our analysis by reviewing basic descriptive statistics. A frequency analysis shows that 31 percent of Americans in 2004 opposed the death penalty and 16 percent disapproved of abortion under all six conditions. Apart from responses of "don't know," there are four salient positions that people can take in relation to capital punishment and abortion. The data show that 7.58 percent of Americans have a consistent life ethic, opposing both abortion under all circumstances and the death penalty. One quarter (25.06 percent) of Americans oppose capital punishment but support abortion under at least one condition. Fifty-eight (58.19) percent of Americans support both the death penalty and abortion under at least one condition. And 9.17 percent support capital punishment but oppose abortion under all six conditions.

TABLE 1 Analyses of Opposition to the Death Penalty, Opposition to Abortion, and Having a Consistent Life Ethic (standardized logistic regression coefficients and odds ratios)

Independent variables	Model 1 Opposition to the death penalty		Model 2 Opposition to abortion		Model 3 Oppose the death penalty and abortion		Model 4
	Beta	Odds	Beta	Odds	Beta	Odds	Beta
Close Loving God	0.356***	1.068	0.337***	1.112	0.531**	1.104	0.492
Religious attendance	0.168*	1.119	0.214*	1.303	0.405**	1.313	0.397**
Pray	-0.150	0.854	0.049	1.344	-0.135	0.868	-0.181
Biblical literalism	-0.034	0.876	0.143*	2.836	0.102	1.477	0.128
Denominational attachment	-0.099	0.841	0.132	1.259	-0.026	0.954	-0.008
Catholic	0.105	1.544	0.166	1.993	0.425*	5.797	0.674
Conservative Protestant	-.042	0.846	0.245*	2.628	0.310	3.408	0.262
Black Protestant	-.076	0.589	0.034	1.265	0.040	1.317	0.197
Jewish	0.070	3.349	-0.725	0.001	-0.666	0.001	-0.550
Other affiliation	-.026	0.770	-0.037	0.684	-0.011	0.889	-0.271
No affiliation	.208*	2.846	0.168	2.330	0.295	4.394	-2.372
Religious transformation	.033	1.129	0.013	1.050	0.045	1.181	0.030
Altruism	-0.125*	0.966	0.043	1.012	-0.075	0.979	-0.104
Political conservatism	-0.126*	0.848	0.256***	1.398	-0.046	0.942	-0.046
Punitiveness	-0.262***	0.481	-0.097	0.761	-0.062	0.840	-0.051
Black	0.215**	3.368	-.069	0.678	0.065	1.441	0.072
Southerner	0.001	0.996	-0.161*	0.546	-0.225*	0.431	-0.229*
Male	-0.226***	0.437	0.072	1.301	0.031	1.121	-0.016
College	0.084	1.363	.058	1.237	0.014	1.053	0.012

TABLE 1 *Continued*

Independent variables	Model 1 Opposition to the death penalty		Model 2 Opposition to abortion		Model 3 Oppose the death penalty and abortion		Model 4	
	Beta	Odds	Beta	Odds	Beta	Odds	Beta	
Income	−0.067	1.942	−0.121*	0.898	−0.150*	0.876	−0.088	
Age	0.047	1.005	−0.182**	0.980	−0.101	0.989	−0.079	
Victim	0.031	1.189	−0.105	0.556	−0.098	0.577	−0.094	
Married	0.001	1.007	0.052	1.214	−0.072	0.764	−0.059	
Catholic*CLG[a]							−0.216	
Black Protestant*CLG							0.055	
Conservative Protestant*CLG							−0.149	
Jewish*CLG							−0.057	
Other affiliation*CLG							0.210	
No affiliation*CLG							1.637	
R^2	0.278***		0.327***		0.276***		0.299***	
n	729		736		729		729	

[a]CLG, Close Loving God scale
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .01$

Model 1 of Table 1 presents the effects of a close relationship with a loving God on opposition to the death penalty net of controls. People who have a close relationship with a loving God are significantly more likely to oppose capital punishment. A unit change in the Close Loving God index increases the predicted odds of opposing capital punishment by 0.068. Frequent worship service attendance and no denominational affiliation also predict opposition to the death penalty. Consistent with prior research, African Americans are significantly (i.e., 3.6 times) more likely to oppose the death penalty. By contrast, less altruistic individuals, political conservatives, more punitive persons, and males are significantly more supportive of the death penalty.

Model 2 of Table 1 presents the results from regressing opposition to abortion on the Close Loving God index and our other variables. Respondents who have a close relationship with a loving God are significantly more likely to oppose abortion. A unit change in the Close Loving God index increases the predicted odds of consistent opposition to abortion by 0.112. Model 2 indicates that those who attend religious services often, biblical literalists, conservative Protestants, and political conservatives are more likely to oppose abortion while Southerners, those with higher incomes, and older Americans are less likely to do so.

Model 3 of Table 1 reports the results of regressing our measure of a consistent life ethic (that is, opposition to both the death penalty and abortion under all circumstances) on the Close Loving God index while controlling for the other variables. As demonstrated in Model 3, Americans with a close relationship with a loving God are significantly more likely to embrace a consistent life ethic. A unit change in the Close Loving God index increases the predicted odds of endorsing a consistent life ethic by 0.104.[4] The results additionally show that people who attend worship services often and Catholics are significantly more likely to do so and Southerners and people with higher incomes are less likely to oppose both capital punishment and abortion. It is noteworthy that none of the other denominational affiliations predicted a consistent life ethic.

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[4]The Close Loving God index is negatively and significantly related to each of the "yes" abortion measures included in the 2004 GSS (i.e., support for abortion): "If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children?" (-0.31, $p = .000$); "If she became pregnant as a result of rape?" (-0.37, $p = .000$); "If she is married and does not want any more children?" (-0.33, $p = .000$); "If there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby?" (-0.30, $p = .000$); "If the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?" (-0.26, $p = .000$); "If she is not married and does not want to marry the man?" (-0.35, $p = .000$). A factor analysis of these six items produced two factors with only the "If the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy" substantively loading on the second factor (0.61). Consequently, we deleted this item from our *Oppose Abortion* index. In analyses not reported here, we included the woman's health condition in our *Oppose Abortion* index and the results are substantively the same as reported in Model 2 of Table 1. We also included the women's health measure in the consistent life ethic variable, and, the results remained largely the same as those in Model 3 of Table 1.

Given the denominational bases of a consistent life ethic that surface in previous research, we next examine whether the linkages between a close relationship with a loving God and a consistent life ethic vary by denominational affiliation. We constructed six interaction terms (one for each denominational family) and simultaneously entered them into the logistic regression equation presented in Model 4 of Table 1. We do so to determine if the effects of Close Loving God vary across denominational affiliations. None of the interaction terms was significant. These results indicate that the relationship between having a close relationship with a loving God and expressing a consistent life ethic does not vary by denominational affiliation.

DISCUSSION

Our study offers a partial test of the religious antecedents of a consistent life ethic, defined here (due to data limitations) as the factors underlying opposition to both the death penalty and abortion. While there is some evidence that Catholics are most likely to oppose both capital punishment and abortion, our study extends previous investigations by examining the influence of God imagery on this disposition (Perl and McClintock 2001). Our study clearly indicates that simultaneous opposition to abortion and the death penalty can be traced to individuals reporting a close relationship with a loving God, which is a cognitive schema that creates a generalized opposition to the intentional termination of life (at least where abortion and capital punishment are concerned). It would seem that individuals with this cognitive schema have a life-affirming moral belief system, one in which God is viewed as the creator of life and as the only legitimate entity for determining when life should end. It is also worth noting that, apart from age, religious factors—and especially God imagery—exhibit a persistent influence on opposition to abortion and the death penalty.

Of course, our correlational study cannot address causal questions. Thus, there is the need for future longitudinal research to assess the causal ordering between the development of God images, other religious factors, and public policy preferences. Some research reveals that God images develop from early socialization experiences and may provide a springboard for later religious experiences (De Roos et al. 2001). We have largely accepted these assumptions, but life-course data are needed to scrutinize them empirically. If these assumptions are correct, then God images could be considered a foundational facet of religious socialization and identity formation, with an overriding influence on sentiments toward public policy.

A number of other fruitful avenues for investigation should also be considered. First, given data limitations, we were not able to analyze other important facets of a consistent life ethic (e.g., opposition to stem cell research or euthanasia) in tandem with attitudes toward abortion and capital punishment.

Such research is desperately needed to identify with more authority the scope and sources of a consistent life ethic.[5] Second, research is needed to determine the various pathways through which a consistent life ethic may be cultivated. Catholics are the best example of what we suspect is a formal institutional transmission of a consistent life ethic (see Welch and Legge 1991). Yet, as we have seen in this study and prior research, Catholics account for only a portion of those who embrace a consistent life ethic. Another possible pathway for the cultivation of a consistent life ethic may involve the development of a close relationship with a loving God from early socialization experiences with parents, teachers, and significant others who advocate that individuals develop a close relationship with a God of love and mercy. Nevertheless, there may be a combination of formal (institutional) and informal religious influences that generate support for a consistent life ethic.

In addition, future scholarship is needed to explore the complex, multidimensional character of God images. Previous research has determined that judgmental images of God are linked with opposition to abortion (Bader and Froese 2005; Froese and Bader 2008), even as our study found that closeness to a loving God is also connected with opposition to abortion and support for a consistent life ethic. This panoply of findings suggests that that the prevailing schemes for analyzing God images (degree of distance from God and level of judgment by God) may need to be expanded beyond a two-dimensional framework. Religious believers may simultaneously affirm God's judgment of human behavior (divine mandates for moral rectitude) and God's love for "His children" (divine affection for all persons). Value orientations such as love and judgment may at first blush seem to be contradictory, but could in fact be "lived out" in ways that make them complementary in human relationships and between deity and believers.

We end, then, with a call for additional research on the social sources, contours, and outcomes associated with what seems to be a significant and transposable religious schema—that is, the nature and quality of one's relationship with deity. Until such research can be conducted, there is mounting evidence of the salient influence that a close relationship with a loving God exerts on Americans' political views, even when issues cut across the conventional liberal-conservative political divide.

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[5]At the prompting of a reviewer, we explored the influence of close loving God imagery on the 2004 GSS euthanasia measure ("When a person has a disease that cannot be cured, do you think doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient's life by some painless means if the patient and his family request it?", with coding as follows: support = 1 do not support = 0). Americans who reported that they have a close relationship with a loving God were significantly less likely to support euthanasia (-0.30, $p = .000$, $n = 394$), and this finding persisted in regression analyses featuring all covariates in Table 1 ($\beta = 0.23$, $p = .05$, $n = 359$), revealing consistent life-affirming stances toward the death penalty, abortion, and euthanasia.

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