Divine Justice: The Relationship Between Images of God and Attitudes Toward Criminal Punishment

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Abstract

Some have argued that moralistic considerations trump other factors in determining attitudes toward criminal punishment. Consequently, recent research has examined how views of God influence sentiments regarding criminal punishment. Using the Baylor Religion Survey (BRS) 2005, we find that (a) angry and judgmental images of God are significant predictors of punitive attitudes regarding criminal punishment and the death penalty and (b) images of God as loving and engaged in the world are not consistently significant predictors of attitudes toward criminal punishment, once measures of God's perceived anger and judgment are considered.

Keywords

punitive attitudes, capital punishment, death penalty, image of God, religion, public opinion

When it comes to matters of crime and justice, few issues arouse as much passion or debate as the punishment of criminals. The revelation of particularly horrifying crimes such as the murder or abuse of children often prompts fear and outrage and a call from the public for the harsher punishment of criminals (Jenkins, 1994). Academic studies have similarly entered the debate about the punishment of criminals, often with a focus on the ultimate punishment—the death penalty.

For several decades, survey research suggested the majority of Americans supported the death penalty for persons convicted of murder. Although recent changes to the question format and growing support for alternative punishments suggest diminished support for the ultimate sanction, sizable numbers of Americans continue to express moral and practical support for capital punishment as a sentencing option.[1] Although researchers have studied a number of factors associated with public support for the death penalty, much of the recent research has focused on (a) racial differences, (b) criminal victimization and fear of crime (mugging thesis), (c) execution of innocent people, and (d) the effect of information on death penalty support (Marshall hypotheses). In addition to surveys

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and public opinion polls monitoring public attitudes concerning capital punishment, researchers have conducted studies seeking to determine the linkages, if any, between the death penalty and factors like deterrence, incapacitation, arbitrariness, and discrimination (for reviews, see Bohm, 1998, 2007; Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000; Gross, 1998; Hood & Hoyle, 2008).

Public opinion polls and survey research provide insight into the fundamental reasons why Americans support or oppose the death penalty. For example, recent national surveys and polls reveal that, among Americans who favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder, the most common reasons are based on retribution (e.g., "an eye for eye" or "the punishment fits the crime"). Alternatively, among Americans who oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder, the most common reason is "it is wrong to take a life" (The Gallup Organization, 2007). It would appear from these survey findings that Americans are influenced in rather significant ways by retribution, as well as moral perspectives, when it comes to the death penalty. We also know that support for the death penalty varies widely for various subgroups of the population.

A common underlying theme of research on the death penalty has been to unravel why support for the death penalty remains high among Americans. In addition to the question formatting issue noted above, a number of scholars have suggested there are too few thoughtful studies examining the extent to which cultural factors (e.g., moral, philosophical, and religious) influence societal attitudes toward criminal laws, penal institutions, and the death penalty (Cook, 1998a, 1998b; Garland, 1990, 2001; Young, 1992; Young and Thompson, 1995). Indeed, the continued support of a majority of the American public for capital punishment under at least some circumstances, coupled with the inability to reach some kind of common moral ground regarding the death penalty, has allowed the debate to remain unnecessarily focused on questions of social utility. In recent years, some scholars have sought to reposition the focus of scholarship on punishment by calling for research that more intentionally focuses on broader and understudied factors like, for example, the role of religion in shaping (a) attitudes toward capital punishment and attitudes toward criminal punishment in general (Cook, 1998a; Unnever, Cullen, & Bartkowski, 2006; Young, 1992), (b) the state's response to criminal conduct (Garland, 2001), or (c) current theories of punishment (Savelsberg, 2002).

Unfortunately, researchers often make assumptions about religion, religious beliefs, and religious practices that oversimplify what is, in actuality, a very complex American religious landscape (Dougherty, Johnson, & Polson, 2007). For example, recent research suggests that Americans hold vastly different views of God and these different views are very predictive of contrasting positions people hold on a variety of current moral and political issues, such as gay marriage, abortion, or the environment (Froese & Bader, 2007). Indeed, recent studies have examined how images of God as loving and images of God as harsh and unforgiving are related to attitudes about criminal punishment. However, due to limitations in existing surveys, such research has been forced to focus on only a single possible image of God. In other words, current research does not allow us to determine *which* conceptions of God are the strongest predictors of punitive attitudes. Using data from the Baylor religion survey (BRS), a recent national survey of the general population, we examine the effects of four measures of God's perceived disposition—God's perceived love, engagement, anger, and judgment—on the desire to punish criminals more harshly and support for the death penalty. Doing so will allow us to identify what conceptions of God appear to have the strongest associations with attitudes regarding criminal punishment.

Religion and Attitudes Toward Criminal Punishment

Although Zeisel and Gallup (1989) found that political leanings, ethnic background, gender, and economic status are important correlates of support or opposition to the death penalty, they conclude that death penalty sentiment is ultimately determined more by moralistic than utilitarian considerations (p. 292). Interestingly, one might also argue "symbolic predispositions" hold true for many

religious beliefs and attitudes on a host of issues, including those related to views of punishment. If it is reasonable to assume that moral reasoning can shape attitudes toward criminal punishments, it is also important to understand what factors help shape these moral as well as cultural viewpoints. Consequently, it makes sense that research on attitudes toward criminal punishment should also focus on the role of religion or spirituality in assessing moral viewpoints.

That religion is a factor contributing to attitudes regarding criminal punishment is not a new idea. In *Division of Labor*, Durkheim (1997) argued that sentiments that motivate punishment consist of emotions of moral outrage and shocked reactions to sacrilege. Durkheim claims such moral outrage is socially derived and not the result of base instincts. Furthermore, these strong emotional reactions are linked with the depth of religious commitment found within communities of believers. Durkheim's reasoning is further elaborated in Garland's statement that, ''crimes are offences against society's sacred moral order which in turn corresponds to deeply held sentiments within society's individual members'' (1990, p. 31). To assume, therefore, that attitudes toward punishment operate wholly independent of religious sensibilities, especially in a highly religious society like the United States, would seem to be needlessly shortsighted. But, beyond the basic percentages of Protestants, Catholics, or Jews supporting or opposing the death penalty (and a majority of each group supports the death penalty), until recently we have known relatively little about the relationship between religious sensibilities and attitudes about the punishment of criminals (Cook, 1998a; Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Unnever, Cullen, & Applegate, 2005; Young, 1992).

Previous research has produced mixed findings regarding the relationship between religion and punitive attitudes toward criminals. For example, the relationship between religious tradition and punitive attitudes appears to depend on how religious tradition is measured. Studies have found little to no significant differences between Catholics, Protestants and Jews with regard to beliefs about the lenience of courts (Flanagan & Jamieson, 1988), preferred sentence severity (Blumstein & Cohen, 1980) or level of support for the death penalty (Hindelang, 1974; Tyler & Weber 1982). Studies that split Protestants into more specific groupings, however, have found a relationship between religious tradition and punitive attitudes. For example, Perl and McClintock (2001) found that Catholics and Mainline Protestants who opposed abortion also tended to oppose the death penalty, but support for the death penalty and abortion attitudes were unrelated among Evangelicals. Several studies have specifically focused on conservative Protestant denominations. For example, Myers (1988, 1989) found that conservative Protestant judges in Georgia were less likely to grant probation (see also: Grasmick, Davenport, Chamlin, & Bursik, 1992; Young, 1992).

The call for the inclusion of religion measures in studies of public attitudes regarding crime and punishment by Applegate et al. (2000) resulted in a spate of studies in the last decade. Some studies find that people with more conservative religious beliefs, such as a literal view of the Bible, tend to advocate for harsher criminal penalties (Cook & Powell, 2003; Grasmick, Cochran, Bursik, & Kimpel, 1993), whereas others present mixed findings (Applegate et al., 2000; Unnever & Cullen, 2006). Britt (1998) found religious fundamentalism interacts with race, such that White fundamentalists are far more supportive of the death penalty than African American fundamentalists. The relationship between fundamentalism and support for capital punishment may also depend on region of the country, as several studies report a relationship between religious fundamentalism and support for the death penalty in the south, but not other regions of the country (Young, 1992; Young & Thompson, 1995).

One type of religious belief that should be related to attitudes regarding punishment is images of God- how an individual conceives of, or imagines, God. Images of God provide a window into the believer's religious worldview. Some individuals do not believe in God, others imagine a distant, impersonal, and cosmic force. Still others imagine a human-like being with the ability to feel love and become angered (Stark, 2001). Sociologists of religion, such as Greeley (1988, 1989, 1991, 1993, 1995) and Stark (2001), have long noted the importance of images of God in understanding

the behaviors and attitudes of religious people. Greeley extensively investigated the correlation between images of God as motherly and loving, with political and social attitudes (cf. Greeley 1988, 1989, 1991, 1993, 1995), finding relationships between loving/compassionate images of God and forgiving/compassionate opinions toward others. Indeed Greeley (1995, p. 124) argues:

> The central religious symbol is God. One's "picture" of God is in fact, a metaphorical narrative of God's relationship with the world and the self as part of that world.

Following this line of reasoning, recent studies have found a significant relationship between images of God and punitive attitudes. For example, Unnever and Cullen (2006) and Evans and Adams (2003) create measures of the extent to which God is seen as harsh and judgmental, finding such God images to be a significant predictor of support for capital punishment and a general punitive attitude, respectively. Using 1998 GSS data, Unnever et al. (2005) find a measure of God's level of graciousness to be negatively related to support for capital punishment and support for a harsher court system. Nearly replicating this analysis, Unnever et al. (2006) find a relationship between images of God as close and loving and reduced support for capital punishment.

Other recent research (Bader & Froese, 2005; Froese & Bader, 2007, 2008; Froese, Bader, & Smith, 2008; Mencken, Bader, & Embry, 2009) has found two perceived characteristics of God, God's perceived level of engagement (Engaged God) and God's perceived level of judgment (Judgmental God) to be related to a variety of political, moral, and social attitudes. Mencken et al. (2009) find a judgmental image of God to be significantly related to the distrust of neighbors, coworkers, atheists, and people in general, whereas Froese et al. (2008) find that God's judgment is also related to intolerant attitudes toward atheists, homosexuals, racists, and communists. Froese and Bader (2007) find that God's engagement and God's judgment are both significantly associated with the belief that God favors the United States in world affairs, but only God's judgment is related to the belief that God favors particular political parties.

Although such studies provide evidence that different conceptions of God are related to social attitudes, it remains unclear *which* images of God are most salient with regard to attitudes regarding criminal punishment. Due to limitations in data sources, most previous research has been forced to focus on a single aspect of God's perceived disposition. For example, we know that holding a loving God image appears to reduce support for capital punishment, whereas belief in a judgmental God appears to increase support for the death penalty. If we wish to unpack the manner in which religious beliefs affect punitive attitudes, we must examine whether God's perceived level of judgment has an effect on punitive attitudes when controlling for belief in a loving God.

Methodology

Data

The data used in this study are from the 2005 administration of the BRS. Consisting of a random, national sample of 1,721 U.S. citizens, the BRS was administered and collected by the Gallup Organization. The BRS was designed using the General Social Survey (GSS) as a model. Similar to the GSS, the BRS includes both fixed content and rotating topic modules. However, although it contains questions on a variety of topics ranging from civic engagement to political tolerance, the majority of the fixed content of the BRS is devoted to religion items. In each administration of the BRS, rotating content modules will make it possible to examine the relationship between religiosity and a variety of different behaviors and attitudes. The BRS data are ideal for the current purposes as they include two items specifically related to punitive attitudes toward criminals, as well as the items necessary to develop a detailed portrait of how respondents conceive of God. We weight the data to bring all of the distributions into alignment with population parameters. The weight variable in the BRS corrects

for gender, race, region, age, and education. A detailed discussion of the methodological background and issues informing the design and administration of the survey and how it compares to other national surveys is published elsewhere (Bader, Froese, & Mencken, 2007).

Outcome Measures

The BRS includes two items related to punitive attitudes. First, respondents were asked if the federal government should punish criminals more harshly than it currently does. Second, respondents were asked if they think the death penalty should be abolished by the federal government. Responses were on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The criminal punishment item was coded such that higher scores equate to stronger support for the harsher punishment of criminals. The death penalty item was reverse-coded, such that higher values equate to more support for capital punishment (e.g., the respondent strongly disagrees that the death penalty should be abolished).

Clearly, these items suffer from weaknesses. For example, each item specifically references the federal government. Ideally, the questions would simply ask about the respondent's level of support for punishment without referencing a particular branch or level of government. It is possible that some respondents are supportive of capital punishment and the harsher punishment of criminals in general, but simply do not trust the federal government to carry out such measures. The capital punishment question is further problematic because relatively few death row inmates are under federal jurisdiction. Nevertheless, we believe these items provide a useful window into the criminal punishment attitudes of respondents. Individuals who score highly on both measures are consistent in their belief that criminals should be subject to serious sanctions and are willing to let the government mete out that punishment.

Our dependent variables were ordinal items with left-skewed distributions (e.g., more people favor capital punishment and the harsher punishment of criminals). Furthermore, our dependent variables were on 5-point Likert-type scales. Ordinary least squares (OLS) analysis requires variables with continuous distributions and assumes that distribution approximates a normal curve. The analysis of Likert-type scales with OLS regression is problematic with the major problem being overestimation of regression coefficients (Long, 1997). The most appropriate analysis for a left-skewed, ordinal variable is ordinal logistic regression.[2] However, our models violated the parallel odds assumption of ordinal logistic regression. To circumvent this problem, we follow the advice of epidemiologists and estimate these models as multinomial logit models (see Bender, 1998).

For response categories A, B, and C, the multinomial logistic model estimates the log odds of the following $\Pr(A|x)/\Pr(B|x) = \beta_{0,A|B} + \beta_{1,A|B}x; \Pr(A|x)/\Pr(C|x) = \beta_{0,A|C} + \beta_{1,A|C}x; \Pr(B|x)/\Pr(C|x) = \beta_{0,B|C} + \beta_{1,}B|Cx$. Moreover, $\exp(\beta_{1,A|B})$ is the odds of response outcome A versus response outcome B for a one-unit change in x (see Long, 1997). Many of the same assumptions for OLS also apply for ordered multinomial logistic regression, including uncorrelated independent variables and uncorrelated error terms. Other assumptions, such as the requirement of a normally distributed error term do not apply. The analysis generates a single estimate that contrasts two response categories (Agresti, 2002). Our categories are coded in such a way that the most conservative response to these two questions is contrasted against all other possible response categories. We provide Nagelkerke's estimate of R^2 for each table.

Image of God Measures

The BRS includes a battery of items regarding beliefs about God. In addition to asking whether respondents believe in God, the BRS also asks respondents to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements regarding God's general disposition and level of involvement in the world. Several additional items ask respondents how well a series of adjective ratings describe God's nature and/or personality. Eight of these items relate to God's perceived level of interest in or concern with

Table 1. Factor Analysis of Image of God Items (Varimax Rotation)

God is . . .	Factor 1: God's Love	Factor 2: God's Engagement	Factor 3: God's Anger	Factor 4: God's Judgment
Ever-present	**.747**	.296	.124	.089
Forgiving	**.887**	.241	.136	.071
Friendly	**.776**	.235	.108	.124
Kind	**.870**	.276	.156	.099
Loving	**.885**	.222	.139	.064
Concerned with well-being of the world	**.648**	.412	.292	.085
Concerned with my well-being	**.640**	.487	.317	.094
Distant	.222	**.502**	.020	−.207
Directly involved in world affairs	.321	**.604**	.313	.216
Directly involved in my affairs	.380	**.632**	.313	.201
Removed from worldly affairs	.257	**.793**	.098	.059
Removed from my affairs	.318	**.790**	.081	.052
Angered by human sins	.265	.181	**.807**	.299
Angered by my sins	.259	.220	**.813**	.265
Critical	.085	−.070	.118	**.551**
Punishing	.103	.123	.193	**.750**
Severe	.057	.009	.059	**.870**
Wrathful	.056	.100	.113	**.801**
Eigenvalue	8.38	2.80	1.45	1.03

* We retrained items with loading scores ≥ .5

the world. For example, 6 of those items query level of agreement with the following descriptions of God: "removed from worldly affairs," "removed from my personal affairs," "concerned with the well-being of the world," "concerned with my personal well-being," "directly involved in worldly affairs," and "directly involved in my affairs." Two additional items ask respondents how well the adjectives "distant" and "ever-present" describe God: "not at all," "not very well," "undecided," "somewhat well," or "very well."

Further questions on the BRS tap the extent to which God is perceived to be loving and forgiving in nature. Using the same possible response categories noted above, respondents applied the adjectives "forgiving," "friendly," "kind," and "loving" to God. A final series of items center on God's perceived level of anger with, and judgment of the world. Respondents are asked if they agree that God is "angered by human sins" and "angered by my sins." They are also asked how well the adjectives "critical," "punishing," "severe," and "wrathful" describe God.

Given the variety of different measures of God images used in previous research, we elected to perform a factor analysis on the 18 items noted above (see Table 1). Varimax rotation resulted in distinct characteristics of individual images of God. The first factor, hereafter referred to as "God's love," had the highest factor loadings on the adjectives "ever-present," "forgiving," "friendly," "kind," "loving," and levels of agreement with the statements "God is concerned with the well-being of the world" and "God is concerned with my personal well-being." This factor is somewhat similar conceptually to the measure of a close, loving God by Unnever et al. (2006), which they found to be related to attitudes toward the death penalty. The second factor had the highest loadings on items related to God's direct involvement with the world, including the adjective "distant" and statements such as "God is directly involved in worldly affairs" and "God is directly involved in my affairs." Hence, this factor is quite similar to the measure of God's engagement proposed by Bader and Froese in various works (Bader & Froese, 2005; Froese & Bader, 2007, 2008).

Several studies of the impact of God images on social and moral attitudes have used measures that tap God's perceived level of anger, harshness, and/or judgment (Bader & Froese, 2005; Evans &

Adams, 2003; Froese & Bader, 2007; Unnever & Cullen, 2006). Indeed, we find measures of God's anger and God's judgment load on two separate factors. Levels of agreement with the statement, "God is angered by human sins" and "God is angered by my sins" load highest on a single factor, which we title "God's anger." Ratings for the adjectives "critical," "punishing," "severe," and "wrathful" load highest on the final factor, which we label "God's judgment."

Based on the factor analysis, we created four additive scales: God's love ($\alpha = .95$), God's engagement ($\alpha = .86$), God's anger ($\alpha = .93$), and God's judgment ($\alpha = .84$) by summing the appropriate items. Variables were reverse coded as necessary to ensure that high values equate to higher levels of love, engagement, anger, and judgment. Because our models include four different measures of conceptions of God and several other religion measures, we ran multicollinearity diagnostics for each analysis. In no case was the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) score for a variable above 3. A correlation matrix is available from the authors on request.

Demographics

We included several demographic controls in our analyses. Prior research suggests men are more likely than women to support harsher penalties for criminals. According to Stack (2000), however, even though men are more likely to favor the death penalty, men and women do not have different reasons for supporting criminal punishment (Stack, 2000). Gender is coded 1 = *male* and 0 = *female*. Previous research also suggests age is positively related to more punitive attitudes toward criminals (Unnever & Cullen, 2007b). Age is entered as a simple frequency ranging from 18 to 93. When it comes to research on public opinion about the death penalty, no topic has received more sustained attention than racial differences in support for the death penalty (Cochran & Chamlin, 2006; Johnson, 2001; Unnever & Cullen, 2007a, 2007b; Unnever, Cullen, & Fisher, 2007). Research consistently shows that, compared to Whites, African Americans are significantly less likely to support the death penalty (for a review, see Unnever, Cullen, & Jonson, 2008). Race is coded 1 = *White*. Individuals who are married generally have more punitive attitudes toward criminals (Stack, 2000). Marital status was included as a dichotomous variable (1 = *married*). As Unnever and Cullen (2007a) note, research on the relationship between income and punitive attitudes has been mixed. Some researchers argue that income should be positively related to more punitive attitudes, whereas others argue the relationship between income and punitive attitudes should be negative. Our income measure ranges from 1 ($10,000 or less) to 7 ($150,001 or more).

Previous research on support for capital punishment has found a nonlinear effect for education (Stack, 2003; Unnever et al., 2006). For example, Unnever et al. (2006) found that education acted as a step function—people with greater than a high school education were more likely to support the death penalty, but there was no apparent effect for those with less than a high school education. Following their example, we have also entered education as a dichotomous variable (1 = *post–high school education*). Finally, given the greater use of capital punishment in the southern states (Stack, 2000), which some have attributed to a vigilante tradition and a history of lynching (Messner, Baumer, & Rosenfeld, 2006), we also included a dummy variable for region (1 = *South*).

Political Affiliation

Unnever et al. (2007) examined the relationship between victimization, political orientation, and punitive attitudes toward crime. According to the mugging thesis, people who have never been victims of crime are more likely to be liberal, whereas criminal victimization leads to feelings of vulnerability and the adoption of a conservative worldview. Regardless of criminal victimization, previous research has found a positive relationship between conservative political ideologies and punitive attitudes regarding the punishment of criminals (Jacobs & Carmichael, 2002; Payne

et al., 2004; Unnever et al., 2005). Unfortunately, the BRS does not include an item that directly taps a respondent's level of conservatism, only their strength of affiliation with either the Republican or Democratic party. Specifically, respondents are asked "How would you describe yourself politically?" with the possible responses "Strong Republican," "Moderate Republican," "Leaning Republican," "Independent," "Leaning Democrat," "Moderate Democrat," and "Strong Democrat." The item was coded such that high values equate to more Republican political leanings.

Trust

To the extent that one distrusts the government, we should expect (and Zimring, 2003 predicts) that one will wish to restrict the government's power, including its ability to use the death penalty as a form of punishment (see also Tonry, 1999). We include two measures related to trust in the government/criminal justice system—trust in the government and trust in the police. The first item asks respondents how much they trust the U.S. government with the possible responses "not at all," "only a little," "some," and "a lot." Using the same possible responses, respondents were also asked about trust in the police.

Racial Animus

One factor that has consistently been found to be related to White support for capital punishment is racial prejudice (Soss, Langbein, & Metelko, 2003; Unnever & Cullen, 2007b; Unnever et al., 2006). As Unnever et al. (2008, p. 69) state, "Whites who harbor racial animus toward African Americans, particularly those who endorse the new form of racism—that is, who are symbolic racists—are significantly more likely to support capital punishment." Using data from France, Great Britain, Japan, and Spain, Unnever et al. found that racial and ethnic resentment were significantly related to support for the death penalty and/or reinstating the death penalty cross-culturally. Given previous research, we include in our models an item from the BRS that arguably serves as a measure of symbolic racism. Respondents were asked their level of trust for "people of other races," using the same scale as for the item regarding the police and U.S. government.

Other Religion Measures

To ensure that our image of God measures are not simply proxies for religiosity or religiousness, we include several religion controls in our analyses—church attendance, Biblical literalism, and religious tradition. Church attendance ranges from 1 (*never*) to 9 (*several times a week*). For the measures of Biblical literalism, we use an item that asks respondents about their view of the Bible, selecting from the categories "The Bible is an ancient book of history and legends," "the Bible contains some human error," "The Bible is perfectly true, but it should not be taken literally, word-for-word. We must interpret its meaning," and "The Bible means exactly what it says. It should be taken literally, word-for-word, on all subjects." We treated this item as an ordinal measure of literalism, because higher scores indicate increasingly literal views of the Bible.

Finally, we include a set of dummy variables for religious tradition. We used the Religious Tradition (RELTRAD) classification scheme Steensland et al. (2000) developed by researching the history and theological perspectives of individual denominations. Respondents are placed in one of seven categories based on their reported affiliation—Catholic, Black Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Jewish, other, and none (no religious affiliation). Respondents who indicated they are nondenominational Christians but go to church at least monthly were coded as Evangelicals. The contrast category was set to Evangelical. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for the study variables.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Demographics				
Male	.47	.49	0	1
Age	2.67	.95	1	4
White	.86	.34	0	1
Married	.57	.49	0	1
Family income	4.16	1.59	1	7
College education	.73	.44	0	1
Southern	.30	.45	0	1
Politics and trust				
Political affiliation	4.06	2.05	1	7
Trust of other races	2.99	.58	1	4
Trust of government	2.49	.81	1	4
Trust of police	3.04	.76	1	4
Religious tradition				
Catholic	.21	.41	0	1
Black protestant	.05	.22	0	1
Mainline protestant	.22	.42	0	1
Jewish	.03	.16	0	1
Other religion	.05	.22	0	1
No religion	.11	.31	0	1
Other religion measures				
Attendance	4.85	2.88	1	9
Biblical literalism	2.64	1.08	1	4
Images of God				
God's love	29.99	7.01	7	35
God's engagement	18.51	5.37	5	25
God's anger	6.81	2.68	2	10
God's judgment	10.26	4.80	4	20
Dependent variables				
Harsher punishment for criminals	3.86	1.14	1	5
Support for capital punishment	3.80	1.35	1	5

Results

   Previous research has found images of God as loving or gracious to be related to attitudes about capital punishment and/or the harsher punishment of criminals in general (Unnever et al., 2005, 2006), whereas other studies (Evans & Adams, 2003; Unnever & Cullen, 2006) have found images of God as harsh and judgmental to be predictors of punitive attitudes regarding criminals. Limited by the available questions, each of these studies could only test the effects of certain images of God on their outcome measures. The current study tests for which images of God appear to be the most salient predictors when considered together and with a robust set of controls.

   Table 3 presents the results of a multinomial logistic regression for belief that the government should punish criminals more harshly on images of God and our independent and control variables.

   Although we were most concerned with the effects of images of God on attitudes regarding the harsher punishment of criminals, several other factors had significant effects. The most consistent predictors were related to trust and political affiliation. For example, people who have high trust in people of other races were consistently less supportive of harsher punishment for criminals more likely to fall into the disagree and strongly disagree categories than others. Political affiliation was

Table 3. Multinomial Logistic Regression of Harsher Punishment for Criminals[a]

	Strongly Agree Versus Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree Versus Disagree	Strongly Agree Versus Undecided	Strongly Agree Versus Agree	Agree Versus Disagree
Demographics					
Male	−0.686	−0.306	0.418	−0.008	−0.306
Age	−0.509	−0.159	−0.212	−0.117	−0.159
White	1.274*	0.314	1.295**	0.403	0.314
Married	−0.203	0.04	0.409	0.054	0.041
Family income	0.163	0.146	−0.112	0.065	0.146
College education	−1.597	−0.549	0.003	−0.579***	−0.549
Southern	1.384	0.493	−0.938**	−0.218	0.493
Politics and trust					
Political affiliation	0.53***	0.303***	0.36***	0.161***	0.303***
Trust of other races	−2.298***	−0.923***	−0.848***	−0.324**	−0.923***
Trust of government	0.126	−0.091	−0.298	−0.292**	−0.091
Trust of police	1.949***	0.564***	0.597*	0.096	0.564***
Religious tradition					
Catholic	−0.142	−0.251	−0.618	−0.12	−0.251
Black protestant	−17.8	1.811	0.915	0.946	−1.181
Mainline protestant	−1.465	−1.03***	−1.045*	−0.274	−1.031***
Jewish	−2.649	−1.917***	−2.599**	−0.656	−1.917*
Other religion	−1.801	−1.484***	−0.67	−0.969	−1.484**
No religion	−1.368	−0.688	−2.307***	0.129	−0.688
Other religion measures					
Attendance	−0.346***	−0.194***	−0.276**	−0.046	−0.194***
Biblical literalism	1.033***	0.187	−0.211	0.184	0.187
Images of God					
God's love	−0.018	0.038	−0.015	0.049*	0.038
God's engagement	−0.053	0.018	0.093*	−0.018	0.018
God's anger	0.478***	0.159***	0.175***	0.011	0.159***
God's judgment	0.137***	0.075***	0.093*	0.012	0.075***
Intercept	1.059	−1.432	1.311	−0.996	−1.432
Nagelkerke R^2=.379		N = 1,092			

[a] The odds of strongly agreeing with the statement increase by a factor of exp(b). For example, the odds of a White person strongly agreeing versus strongly disagreeing with the statement on punishing criminals more severely are 3.57 times greater than for a non-White person (exp(1.274) = 3.575).

* $P \leq .05$; **$P \leq .01$; ***$P \leq .001$

also consistent, but in the opposite direction—those who are more conservative politically tend to agree or strongly agree that criminals should be punished more harshly.

Other than images of God, church attendance was the most consistent predictor of attitudes regarding harsher punishment. Those who attend church services with greater frequency have a strong tendency to disagree that criminals should be treated more harshly. Curiously, at the extremes of opinions, church attendance and Biblical literalism have countervailing effects. Being someone who views the Bible as the literal word of God's will is strongly related to the desire to punish criminals more harshly, whereas high levels of church attendance is associated with more forgiving attitudes toward criminals. It seems that the harshest attitudes will be among literalists who rarely attend services.

When differentiating those who strongly agree that the federal government should do more to punish criminals from those who strongly disagree with this statement neither images of God as loving, nor images of God as engaged, make a difference. Neither is statistically significant in this model

Table 4. Multinomial Logistic Regression for Abolishing Capital Punishment

	Strongly Disagree Versus Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree Versus Agree	Strongly Disagree Versus Neither	Strongly Disagree Versus Disagree	Disagree Versus Agree
Demographics					
Male	−0.253	0.208	−0.797***	0.647***	−0.439
Age	−0.483***	−0.283	−0.215	−0.162	−0.121
White	1.022***	0.587	1.239***	0.052	0.536
Married	−0.058	−0.462	−0.338	−0.334	−0.128
Family income	−0.003	0.117	0.212*	0.088	0.031
College education	−0.588	−0.119	0.234	−0.079	−0.041
Southern	0.012	0.323	0.601	−0.097	0.419
Politics and trust					
Political affiliation	0.467***	0.307***	0.431***	0.181***	0.126
Trust of other races	−1.245***	−0.758**	−0.592***	0.005	−0.763***
Trust of government	0.392**	0.102	−0.196	−0.199	0.301
Trust of police	0.578***	0.561**	0.181	0.237*	0.323
Religious tradition					
Catholic	−0.342	−0.369	−0.484	−0.574*	0.205
Black protestant	−1.294	−1.708*	−0.901	−0.192	−1.517
Mainline protestant	−0.165	−0.875	−0.603	−0.506*	−0.369
Jewish	−0.641	−2.098***	−1.142	−0.862	−1.235
Other religion	0.064	−0.386	−0.843	−0.708	0.322
No religion	−0.923	−2.092**	−0.395	−0.379	−1.713***
Other religion measures					
Attendance	−0.251***	−0.272***	−0.123*	−0.028	−0.244***
Biblical literalism	−0.058	−0.106	−0.144	−0.145	0.039
Images of God					
God's love	−0.001	−0.028	0.066*	0.025	−0.053
God's engagement	0.041	0.066	−0.018	−0.009	0.074**
God's anger	0.091	0.111	0.096	−0.005	0.115
God's judgment	0.104***	0.082**	−0.048	−0.004	0.087*
Intercept	1.231	1.235	−0.567	−0.348	1.584
Nagelkerke R^2 =.348		$N = 1093$			

* $P \leq .05$; **$P \leq .01$; ***$P \leq .001$

(Table 3). Rather, people who hold images of God as more angry and/or more judgmental in nature are significantly more likely to strongly agree (compared to strongly disagree) that criminals should be punished more harshly by the government. Moreover, these two images of God (angry, judgmental) serve to differentiate those who strongly agree from those who disagree and from those who are undecided. The only distinction that these two measures do not make is between those who agree and those who strongly agree that the government should do more to punish criminals. Images of God as angry and judgmental also differentiate those who agree with the statement with those who disagree. The more angry and judgmental your view of God, the more likely you are to agree or strongly agree that the government should do more to punish criminals. In other words, it appears that people who see God as an angry, judgmental figure strongly extend that anger and judgment to criminals.

Table 4 presents the multinomial logistic regressions for support for capital punishment on our independent variables, controls, and image of God measures.

With regard to the extremes of opinion toward abolishing the death penalty (strongly disagree vs. strongly agree), there were a number of significant factors other than images of God. Young people

are more likely to strongly agree that the death penalty should be abolished. Whites and conservatives will tend to fall at the strongly disagree end of the scale, that is, they do not wish to see the death penalty abolished. Those who have low trust of other races, high trust of the police, and high trust of the government will also tend to strongly disagree that the death penalty should be abolished. Church attendance was again negatively related to our dependent variables; a higher frequency of church attendance is relative to strong agreement that the death penalty should be abolished. Surprisingly, Biblical literalism is not related to attitudes regarding the death penalty.

Our image of God variables were less consistent predictors of death penalty attitudes than they were for attitudes regarding harsher punishment of criminals in general. Viewing God as loving humanity and/or actively involved in world affairs is not consistently related to views of capital punishment. The most consistent finding is for a judgmental image of God. For each unit increase on the judgmental God scale, the likelihood of strongly disagreeing (in contrast to strongly agreeing) with the statement that the government should abolish the death penalty increases by 11%. This measure also distinguishes those who strongly disagree with the statement from those who agree with it. In addition, having an image of God as judgmental also differentiates those respondents who disagree with this statement from those who agree with it. However, unlike the model for punishment, an angry image of God does not achieve statistical significance for the death penalty question. This is not surprising, however, as the death penalty is the ultimate form of judgment. Those who see God as very judgmental are also more likely to believe that criminals deserve this ultimate judgment.

Discussion

A series of recent studies have examined the relationship between particular images of God and support for capital punishment (Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Unnever et al., 2005, 2006). However, each study was only able to tap one aspect of an individual's image of God due to constraints of the data sources used. For example, Unnever et al. (2006) are able to use the 2004 GSS to test for a relationship between a loving and close image of God and support for capital punishment. But, the 2004 GSS does not include the items necessary to develop a meaningful measure of God's perceived level of judgment or anger. Therefore, despite a recent body of research, we could not tell if, for example, a loving image of God does, in fact, predict punitive attitudes toward criminals, controlling for other aspects of an individual's personal image of God.

Using a recent random survey of American religious views, we also examine the relationship between one's view of God and one's sentiments toward criminal punishment as well as the death penalty. We ultimately find that neither belief in a loving God nor belief in an engaged God is consistently associated with support for capital punishment or the desire to treat criminals more harshly, once we control for God's perceived level of judgment and God's level of anger. We find that judgmental and angry images of God are very consistent predictors of the desire to treat criminals more harshly, and that Judgmental images of God create support for capital punishment, even when controlling for political affiliation, Biblical literalism, religious tradition, trust of the police, the government, and other races and demographic characteristics. In other words, it appears that belief in a God that can get angry at humans and is willing to judge them for their actions is the salient measure of God in predicting views about the punishment of criminals. Apparently, if God can be a harsh and angry judge, then we can hold criminals accountable for their actions, with harsh punishments.

There are several directions for further research suggested by this study. We hope that future research will integrate religion, including images of God, into other established strands of research on criminal punishment and the death penalty. For example, much of the recent research on support for capital punishment has focused on racial differences, criminal victimization (Applegate et al., 2000; Johnson, 2001; Unnever et al., 2007), execution of innocent people (Barkan & Cohn, 2005; Sarat, 2005; Unnever & Cullen, 2005), and distrust (Zimring, 2003). An appreciation for the

importance of religiosity and images of God could inform all of these existing strands of research. For example, racial differences in support for the death penalty might be partially explained by racial differences in religiosity or images of God. Perhaps, the relationship between criminal victimization and support for the death penalty depends on whether individuals have an image of God as loving and forgiving or angry and judgmental. Images of God may also influence the belief that innocent people have been executed which, in turn, may prompt distrust of the government and weaken support for the death penalty (see Mencken et al., 2009).

We also hope that future research can replicate our findings while addressing weaknesses in our outcome measures. Although we believe these items are meaningful measures of respondent attitudes toward criminals and criminal punishment, they could be improved in several ways. Ideally, items would not reference a specific branch of government, ensuring that respondent attitudes are not conflated with their trust or distrust of particular branches. Furthermore, the capital punishment item used in this study asks respondents whether the practice should be abolished. To fully replicate earlier studies, the outcome measure for attitudes about capital punishment would ask respondents if they believe the death penalty is appropriate in cases of murder.

Another challenge facing future research is the standardization of God measures. The questions used to create measures of different perceived aspects of God's character vary widely by survey. For example, several questions on the GSS ask respondents to locate their conception of God between two adjectives. One question asks respondents how they would rate God on a scale with "Judge" at one end and "Lover" on the other. Such scales are problematic, as it is quite possible that an individual might find God to be *both* quite judgmental and quite loving—particularly if God's reprimands are perceived to be a sign of love and attentiveness. Other surveys, such as the BRS, present respondents with lists of single adjectives, so that respondents can assign God seemingly contrary characteristics if it fits their personal theology. Given the fact that research on God images has received relatively little attention until recent years and that items vary widely from survey to survey, it is not surprising that the resultant God measures used across studies can be difficult to compare directly.

Consider problems directly comparing the current study to other recent work. Unnever et al. (2006) found that a "personal relationship with a loving God" (p. 835) was negatively related to support for capital punishment for murderers. We ran models for each of our outcome measures with only God's love and God's engagement included.[3] In these models, God's love was significantly related to support for the harsher punishment of criminals but not support for capital punishment whereas God's engagement was not related to the outcome measures in either model. However, the items used to create each measure differ as do the dependent variables. Consequently, our findings cannot be compared directly. We hope that increased research into images of God will prompt the inclusion of relevant items on a greater variety of surveys and the broadening of items on existing surveys. The increased availability of items would allow researchers in this nascent area of research to create comparable measures of God images across studies.

Despite such concerns, we believe that this study has provided compelling evidence that judgmental and angry images of God are related to punitive attitudes toward criminal punishment and that loving and engaged images of God appear to be mostly unrelated to such attitudes when other factors are taken into consideration. Personal theology is clearly associated with concepts of public sanction, with many individuals mapping God's perceived characteristics to their attitudes in a rather uncomplicated way. People who believe in a God of anger and judgment believe that deviants deserve harsh judgment.

The finding of significant associations between judgmental and angry God measures and more punitive attitudes toward criminal punishment is a critical reminder that future survey research on religion and public sentiment toward the death penalty or criminal punishment will be needlessly shortsighted if measures like views of God, and especially judgmental and angry images of God, are not considered by scholars.

Notes

1. How much Americans support the death penalty is influenced by how questions are worded. Opinion polls conducted by Gallup, for example, have generally focused on two different questions: (a) "Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder?" and (b) "If you could choose between the following two approaches, which do you think is the better penalty for murder—the death penalty or life imprisonment, with absolutely no possibility for parole?" Although the majority of Americans favor the death penalty "for a person convicted of murder" (69% in October, 2007), support for the death penalty diminishes when respondents are given a choice between capital punishment and life in prison without parole (The Gallup Organization, Inc., 2007). In May, 2006 for example, 47% considered the death penalty the better penalty for murder, whereas 48% favored life imprisonment (5% had no opinion). The 2006 survey was the first conducted by Gallup to show a higher percentage of people considered life imprisonment the better penalty for murder. Earlier surveys conducted by Gallup indicated more Americans favored the death penalty, even when life in prison without the possibility of parole was an option. Gallup Polls on the death penalty dating back to the 1930s can be found at www.galluppoll.com.

2. Another possibility was to dichotomize each item into support/do not support categories and perform binary logistic regressions. However, Unnever, Cullen, and Roberts (2005) found that many respondents to national surveys are equivocal in their support for the death penalty. Based on their findings, we elected to use the full range of these variables, allowing greater variance.

3. Full models are available from the authors upon request.

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