

The human being created ‘in the image of God’

Enhance Human Dignity – Abolish Death Penalty

Round Table ‘Religion and Death Penalty’

The Council of Europe

Minsk, 21st June 2013



© Dr. juris Hanne Sophie Greve

Member of the International Commission against the Death Penalty

Former Judge at the European Court of Human Rights

1. **Introduction**
2. **The human being created ‘in the Image of God’**
3. **Human Dignity**
4. **The Death Penalty**
5. **Respect for the dead body**
6. **The religious obligation to enhance human dignity**

‘So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.’

– Genesis 1:27



1. **Introduction**

In the mid 1990s, President Aleksandr Lukashenko asked in a referendum if the people of Belarus wanted to maintain the death penalty. Some 86 per cent of the citizens voted for this.

The vast majority of people in Belarus belong to the Orthodox Church under the spiritual leadership of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Rus’. The Orthodox Church today welcomes the Russian Federation’s moratorium on the death penalty and eventually the abolition of the death penalty.

The second largest religious group belongs to the Roman Catholic Church. The present teaching of the Roman Catholic Church states that the cases in which the execution of the

offender is an absolute necessity are very rare, if not practically non-existent. It has not been possible to produce one hypothetical instance of a crime in which an execution would be warranted. Nonviolent means of incarceration are available to protect society.

Thus the enlightened teaching of both Churches – whose followers make up more than 90 per cent of the Belarusian population – has shifted away from affirming the right of the State to kill malefactors.

This is a most significant development where it seems highly appropriate to reflect on the wording of the Gospel:

‘You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world’

– Matthew 5: 13–14

When things are done in the name of the people, the people – here the vast Christian majority of the population and their sisters and brothers of other faiths – should be kindled to reflect upon capital punishment as a religious, moral and ethical question concerning the supreme value of human life. Believers should influence the society at large by their teaching and their witness.

2. The human being created ‘in the Image of God’

‘So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.’

– Genesis 1:27

This implies that the human person cannot be understood apart from God – the human person partakes of the divine nature by the act of creation. Every human being is made in God’s love and this love identifies who we are at the very core of our being. In the Incarnation God assumed human nature. The human being is created in the image and likeness of God. Generally speaking, the sanctity of human life is a core value of civilisation.

Each and every life is precious. God’s love being the source of life itself there is a fundamental goodness of all life. The human being can neither earn nor lose her or his human dignity, because our human dignity is from God. God’s creative love inheres within *all* human beings and throughout the human community, unconditionally.

That the human being is created in the image and likeness of God reveals God’s purpose in calling us not to be diminished, but to magnify His greatness and reflect His glory.

‘I set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live.’

– Deuteronomy 30:19

The human person has been willed for her or his own sake in the image and likeness of God. Every human being is unique. The human being is a person not just an individual. When an

individual dies, the species remain; when a person dies, someone unique and unrepeatable is lost. The human person is endowed with a unique dignity.

Through God all human beings are interrelated. When life is disrespected – at any time and at any place – then all human life is disrespected. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end.

3. **Human Dignity**

In the Preamble to the Charter of the UN the peoples reaffirm faith ‘in the *dignity* and *worth* of the human person’ and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family. These are the core values of the UN. Article 1 of the UDHR does however combine dignity and worth as ‘dignity’; it reads: ‘*All human beings* are born free and equal in *dignity* and rights.’

Dignity, as I use it, encompasses both worth and dignity. I am mindful of the possibility of addressing the issues separately by saying that each person created in the image of God has an unalienable worth, which must be respected by all; but that it is by doing good that the human being gains dignity. That is to ascertain that worth is given, while dignity is acquired.

In this vein one may say that human rights are based on the worth of the person and should have as their goal the realization of the person’s human dignity. Or, using the common denominator one may say that all human rights

derive from the inherent dignity of the human being. At all events, human rights and liberties are effective inasmuch as they help the individual to grow in good, defend the individual from evil within and without, and promote the individual's positive role in society. God's love calls us to care for each other and to be mutually responsible for each other.

Disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of humankind. The peoples of the UN have joined hands to create a world where human beings shall enjoy freedom from *fear*. Human rights must be protected by the rule of law.

The person has rights and duties originating directly and simultaneously from her or his human nature – rights and duties which are universal, inviolable and inalienable.

The human being is a social creature. Each and everyone is both 'self' and 'the other'. An indelible bond unites all human beings. Already the interchange between the singular and the plural in the quote from Genesis – 'created him' and 'created them' – emphasizes the unity of the nature of the human race. It is chiefly through the love and care of others that each of us gradually comes to know the love of God.

Human rights make up an intertwined totality composed of everyone's many different rights at any one time. *The right to uphold life is of a more fundamental character than other rights. All other rights are but to secure the quality of the life that is being upheld.*

The moral demand upon everyone is to help realize the full dignity of all human beings. Whatever is opposed to life itself; whatever violates the integrity of the human person; whatever insults human dignity, also represent a supreme dishonor to the Creator.

As human beings we must be perennially concerned for the integral development of every human being and the whole human being. Famine; poverty; subhuman living conditions; lack of education; disgraceful working conditions, crime; and the likes are affronts to our human dignity at large. It is for all of us to help make fruitful the talents that God has placed in the heart of each person.

The prevention of crime is possible first of all through education and enlightenment whereby spiritual and moral values are internalized in every person. All are we called upon to assist to overcome the social causes of crime by promoting a just social order where everyone may succeed in realizing their full capacities for the good. No one must be marginalized. Peace is the tranquility of order.

In the story of Cain and Abel, Cain asks, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ Cain refuses to care for his brother and accept responsibility for him. Cain’s denial is a denial of being an integral part of humanity. Cain denies his accountability to his brother and to God. The death penalty reflects our own denial of our shared humanity with every person, and ultimately a denial of God’s gift of life.

4. **The Death Penalty**

‘In [God’s] hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind.’

– Job 12:10

Most religions will agree that only God can take life, as only God can give life. Murder is contrary to the dignity of the person, and also to the holiness of the Creator. There is no humane way to execute a human being.

Christ killed no one nor blessed anyone to kill, on one occasion He prevented a legal execution of a woman, saying ‘Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.’ (John 8:3–11). Christ taught a way of life that centered on love and forgiveness and which seeks the conversion rather than the destruction of enemies.

It makes no difference whether thou kill with a sword or with a word, since killing itself is forbidden. Orthodox priests are forbidden to kill, a reminiscent from the prohibition within the early Church of killing for all baptized persons. State-sanctioned death penalty in the name of the people diminishes the dignity of all in whose name it is administered. ‘We the people’ may become executioners of our own humanity.

There is no conclusive statistical evidence to say that the death penalty make a difference in reducing crime. Human fallibility can never be excluded. In a number of countries

people are opposed to the death penalty because of the scale of malpractices in their law enforcement systems.

The core issue is however, whether it is ever permissible to take life when the malefactor is fully pacified and controlled. The question should be examined in the light of its interrelation with human dignity and the right to life.

Experience tells us that even people who have committed the more serious crimes often change and repent of their wrongdoings. Use of the death penalty prevents the rehabilitation, reconciliation, and redemption of the offender.

Legal systems based on the Judeo-Christian understanding of justice will seek care for the victims, rehabilitation of offenders and reconciliation within society where possible. Russians often call prisoners ‘the unfortunate’. There is compassion attached. A lack of compassion may in itself be a factor causing crime.

After the seminal event of the mass baptism of the residents of Kiev in AD 988 when Grand Prince Vladimir accepted Orthodox Christianity as the religion of his lands – the ‘Baptism of Rus’ – Saint Vladimir abolished executions as being incompatible with the Gospel.

The death penalty contradicts the purpose of the law; that is to establish and maintain the moral order of society, and to restore it when violated. It is not possible to restore the moral

order through immoral means. Death cannot make whole what was lost. Violence begets violence, death begets death.

No punishment can alter the inalienable worth of the one who has committed evil. The death penalty may be understood to give permission for the view that some people do not deserve the respect of human worth given by God; that their Creator gives up on them; that they have to be removed from the earth on which God gave them life. This is an offense to the Christian view of creation. It holds a strong message that Jesus was being crucified with two criminals. Christ told them that everything He is, He is for them, and everything He does, He does for them.

5. **Respect for the dead body**

Article 1 paragraph b) of the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights ascertains:

‘Just as in life, so also after death, the sanctity of a person’s body shall be inviolable. It is the obligation of believers to see that a deceased person’s body is handled with due solemnity.’

This is no less so for those sentenced to death and executed.

Human dignity lasts beyond death. Every religion has its funeral rites. Our three Abrahamic religions honour the sanctity of the dead body. Christians, Jews and Muslims all have special funeral rites that the religious are requested to

take care of. The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the Resurrection.

Our loved ones are given proper graves according to our different religious traditions. This is also needed for society to respect the human dignity of the family and the friends left behind by the deceased. All believers ought to call for the sanctity of the dead body to be respected.

6. The religious obligation to enhance human dignity

A first step to enhance human dignity can be to instigate a moratorium on the use of the death penalty as it has been done in the Russian Federation.

What the people desire is to enhance human dignity and affirm respect for human life. We do not want a ‘culture of death’ that devalues life. The violence of the death penalty may itself foster the violence of criminal actions. There are countries that have chosen to abolish death penalty in all geographical regions, both rich and poor countries, of all cultures, all values, all traditions and all religions.

Crime may cause vicious circles that need to be broken. Reasons for condemning crime overlap in part with the reasons for abolishing the death penalty. The need to transcend a culture of violence, crime and death is urgent.

It is for us to make a more humane world – the one we desire and believe in. We must have the courage to embrace a

culture of life and respect for the worth for every member of the human family.

From a position of power not to take life, is where we differ fundamentally from murderers. Criminals must not benefit from impunity, but must be prosecuted. We should nonetheless opt for the sanctity of life and ask for imprisonment in lieu of the death penalty. Violence and the taking of life brutalize our environment – that is exactly what we want to avoid.

God is merciful. The story of Cain and Abel also reminds us of God's justice and mercy. This is one of the earliest biblical accounts of God's response to human suffering and God's mercy in the face of injustice. Cain is eligible for the death penalty under God's law, but God has mercy on him. Not even a murderer loses his personal worth, and God pledges to guarantee this.

It is for all of us to **enhance human dignity by abolishing the death penalty**, says also the International Commission against the Death Penalty.

