

why
we

kill

why we kill

**understanding violence across
cultures and disciplines**

edited by

**Nancy Loucks, Sally Holt
and Joanna R Adler**



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Joanna R. Adler is a Principal Lecturer in Forensic Psychology. She is the Postgraduate Programme Leader for MSc Forensic Psychology. She has conducted research in areas including fear, power, and victimization in prisons; effects of fear of crime on psychological well-being; intra-familial violence; police stress; the punishment of young offenders; radicalisation of ‘at risk youth’ and hate crimes.

Dr Rohan Gunaratna is Head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, Singapore and Senior Fellow at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy’s Jebson Centre for Counter-Terrorism Studies, Boston. He also holds several honorary appointments including as Senior Fellow, National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, Oklahoma; Member of the Advisory Council, Institute for Counter Terrorism, Israel; and Member, Steering Committee, George Washington University’s Homeland Security Policy Institute. Dr Gunaratna holds a Masters in International Peace Studies from the University of Notre Dame, US and a doctorate in International Relations from the University of St Andrews.

Gunaratna is the author of 12 books including *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, an international bestseller published by Columbia University Press. He also serves on the editorial boards of *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* and *Terrorism and Political Violence*, the leading counter-terrorism academic journals. Gunaratna has over 25 years of academic, policy, and operational experience in counter terrorism. He led the specialist team that designed and built the UN database on the mobility, weapons and finance of Al Qaeda, Taliban and their Entities. Invited to testify before the 9/11 Commission, he debriefed detainees in Asia and the Middle East including high value detainees in Iraq. A litigation consultant to the United States Justice Department, he served as the US expert in the Jose Padilla trial.

Prof Lawrence M. Hinman is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Values Institute at the University of San Diego, where he also directs the ‘Ethics across the Curriculum’ program. He is the author of numerous scholarly as well as popular articles and two books in ethics, *Ethics: A Pluralistic Approach to Moral Theory*, 3rd Ed. (Wadsworth, 2002) and *Contemporary Moral Issues*, 3rd ed. (Prentice-Hall, 2003). His World Wide Web site, *Ethics Updates* (<http://ethics.acusd.edu>) receives over 8,000 visitors a day and has gained numerous awards.

Prof Peter Hodgkinson, BA (Hons), Cert Qual SW, OBE is Founder and Director of the Centre for Capital Punishment Studies (CCPS), Westminster University Law School, London. Prior to joining Westminster in 1989 he was a Probation Officer with the Inner London Probation and Forensic Social Work Advisor at the

Denis Hill Secure Unit. He was Honorary Secretary, British Society of Criminology [1978–83]; Newsletter Editor, Division of Criminological and Legal Psychology, British Psychological Society [1980–84]; Cropwood Fellow, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge [1983]; Member of the Policy Co-ordinating Group and Council of the Howard League for Penal Reform [1982–99]; Editorial Board– Journal of Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health [1989–93]; Written Evidence to the House of Commons, Home Affairs Select Committee on The Year and a day Rule & the Mandatory Life Sentence [Howard League 1983]; Member of the Steering Committee to the Death Penalty in Commonwealth Africa Project, British Institute of International and Comparative Law [2004–06]. Since 1996 he has been Expert and Adviser on capital punishment to the Council of Europe and since 1997 a founding member of the Foreign Secretary’s Death Penalty Panel, working closely with governments and NGOs internationally. He is also an advisor to the Council of Europe on prison issues. In 2004 he was appointed OBE in the Queen’s Birthday Honours for his work promoting human rights.

Professor Hodgkinson has written and published extensively on capital punishment scholarship and its applied relationship to penal policy and practice including *Capital Punishment: Global issues and prospects* (Hodgkinson & Rutherford, eds.), Waterside Press 1996; *Capital Punishment in the USA*, Hodgkinson et alia, UK Parliamentary Human Rights Group, 1996 and with Schabas (eds.), *Capital Punishment: strategies for abolition*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Seema Kandelia LLB (Hons), LL.M joined the Centre for Capital Punishment Studies in 2003 as a postgraduate researcher. Her main areas of focus included research into the issues surrounding victims and the death penalty, public reassurance and alternatives to capital punishment. She also monitored capital punishment developments in the USA, the Philippines, the Middle East and Africa, and worked on issues such as juveniles, mental retardation and innocence. Seema now works as a Lecturer and Research Fellow for the Law School at the University of Westminster.

Dr Maria Kaspersson is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Greenwich. She graduated with a PhD in Criminology from Stockholm University with a thesis on homicide and infanticide in Stockholm. Her current research has involved honour-related violence, the Swedish Prostitution Law and changes in homicide from the 16th to the 20th century. Publications include ‘The Great Murder Mystery’ in *Comparative Histories of Crime* (Dunstall, Emsley & Godfrey, eds., Willan Publishing, 2003) and ‘Homicide and Infanticide in Stockholm 1920–1939’ in *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, 2003.

Dr Nancy Loucks works as an independent criminologist in Scotland and specialises in prison policy and comparative penology. Her work has included extensive research in criminology including the imprisonment of women, aspects of prison discipline and control, violence and bullying, use of drugs and alcohol, suicides and self-injury, and the impact of imprisonment on prisoners' families. Other projects have included research into the employment of people with a criminal record in the European Union, human rights aspects of religious communities in prisons, and risk assessment of serious sexual and violent offenders.

Kay Nooney is a forensic psychologist in HM Prison Service for England and Wales. Her earlier areas of work have included research management and operational research in Prison Service Headquarters. Her work in a London prison specialised in interventions with HIV prisoners, sex offenders and prisoners in crisis. The work in prison was followed by development and evaluation of offending behaviour programmes in prison and the community. She is currently part of the Safer Custody Group in the Prison Service Headquarters, which is concerned with deaths, self-harm and violence in prison custody.

Rupa Reddy LLB (Hons), LL.M was formerly postgraduate researcher at the Centre for Capital Punishment Studies (2002–06) responsible for research on use of the death penalty within the British Commonwealth Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent; as well as research on the issues of gender, race, religion, mental illness and the role of psychiatrists in relation to capital punishment. Rupa also edited the first two volumes of the Centre's Occasional Paper Series journal. She is currently undertaking PhD research at the School of Oriental and African Studies on honour-related violence within UK ethnic minority communities.

Dr Stephen Smith is the co-founder of Britain's first Holocaust Memorial, Beth Shalom, and of the Aegis Genocide Prevention Initiative. He writes and lectures frequently on Holocaust and Genocide studies, and his particular area of specialisation is memorialisation and witness testimony. His awards include an MBE in 2000 and the Interfaith Gold Medallion the same year. Dr Smith edits a continuing series of survivor testimonies (published by Quill Press, 2000–01) and is writer/director of the film documentaries *Wasted Lives* (2000), *Survivors: Memories for the Past, Lessons for the Future* (2001), and *Britain and the Holocaust* (2002). Recent publications include *Forgotten Places: The Holocaust and the Remnants of Destruction*, *The Holocaust and the Christian World*, and *Making Memory: Creating Britain's First Holocaust Centre*.

During the crisis in Kosovo in 1999, Dr Smith directed the East Midlands Kosovo Appeal. A member of the International task Force on Holocaust

Education (Sweden), he works closely with Holocaust projects in Lithuania, Sweden, and the United States. He is Consultant to South Africa's Cape Town Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Dr Sally Smith Holt is an Associate Professor of Religion. She graduated with a PhD in ethics, society and religion from Vanderbilt University. She is interested in sociology of religion and related issues of justice. Recent projects have included research into women's groups and their involvement with fundamentalist religious systems and also research considering just treatment of animals, farming and environmental ethics. Many of the courses she teaches are interdisciplinary, and she has conducted work in the area of capital punishment studies.

Prof Daya J. Somasundaram is the Professor of Psychiatry at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Jaffna and Consultant Psychiatrist at the Teaching Hospital, Jaffna, Sri Lanka. During his sabbatical leave he worked in Cambodia on a Community Mental Health Programme for the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) based in Amsterdam. His research interests include trauma about which he has published papers in international journals and written several books, including *Scarred Minds – the psychological impact of war on Sri Lankan Tamils*. He was instrumental in the adaptation of the WHO manual, *Mental Health of Refugees*, to the Cambodian context as *Community Mental Health in Cambodia* and to the Tamil context as *Mental Health in the Tamil Community*. These manuals are being used to train grass-roots workers in simple psychosocial skills.

Prof Keith Soothill is Emeritus Professor of Social Research and is currently attached to the Centre for Applied Statistics at Lancaster University. His current research interests are in the areas of homicide, sex offending, criminal careers and crime and the media. He taught criminology for over 30 years with well over 200 publications. He wants criminologists to appreciate the links with other disciplines and not to be too narrowly focused. He co-authored the book, *Making Sense of Criminology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), the monograph, *Murder and serious sexual assault: What criminal histories can reveal about future serious offending* (London: Home Office 2002) and co-edited *Handbook of Forensic Mental Health* (Willan, 2008). His writings on serial killing began with the article, 'The Serial Killer Industry', in the *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry* in 1993, and he has subsequently made several contributions in this area.

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Introduction: Religion, Culture and Killing

Sally Smith Holt, Nancy Loucks, and Joanna R. Adler

Whether consciously or unconsciously, people use ethical language every day. We consider what is 'right' and 'good' and think about our 'duty' even if we do not consider specific ethical categories such as virtue, ethics, utilitarianism or deontology. We determine how to judge 'bad' or 'wrong' actions and attempt to put together, even if informally, a code of ethics by which to live. In this text, we look specifically at the act of killing by exploring the ethics of this action, taking an interdisciplinary approach to offer the most comprehensive method for discussing the topic. The book deals with a number of types of killing, often considering religious and cultural factors. Throughout, we seek to build up a complex set of answers to the deceptively simple question of why we kill.

Why We Kill may seem a particularly topical book in view of recent world events, not least the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001, the taking and killing of hostages in Beslan (2004), the terrorist attacks in Madrid (2004), London (2005), and Glasgow (2007). However, planning for the book was well underway before any of these events. They gave an added incentive for publication, but the initial seed had been planted years before, as we thought about how our ethical questions regarding killing could straddle societal and academic boundaries. The questions we ask ourselves and the answers we come to live by should be asked of any era. What wisdom do we draw upon from the past, and how do our contemporary contexts shape us? We believe the answers, or at least the attempt to formulate answers, to such questions are multilayered and complex. Whether the approaches to ethical decision making we use when considering the act of killing are philosophical in orientation or involve a religious component, questions about killing are fraught with difficulty. Let us begin, for example, with the Biblical prohibition against killing found in the Hebrew texts.

Virtually every religion and culture has an equivalent to the Biblical commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill' – but how consistent is this prohibition? Even within one particular religious or cultural system, some instances seem to allow killing while others do not; confusion and debate exists over when and how killing should occur. For example, 'Thou shalt not kill,' a prohibition found in more than one location within the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Exodus 20:13, Deuteronomy 5:17) does not appear to prohibit all killing. Killing by the state for punishment and warfare are generally condoned throughout this religious

text, while the aforementioned prohibition on killing seems to address only outright murder and careless or accidental killing.

In cases of murder and accidental killing, the suggested response is often killing the killer, theoretically because this response restores balance to society. If someone murders, or even kills accidentally, reciprocity demands a response of killing. This may be an act that preserved *imago Dei*, supporting the idea that all life belongs to God. It may have limited blood vengeance: only one life could be taken in response to the killing of an individual. Most biblical scholars concur that both prohibitions against killing and mandates that demand killing are biblical statements that sought to limit vengeance and retaliation and to preserve the idea that life is sacred. Worthy of note is that the Jewish Talmud is very clear that the Sanhedrin took great pains to avoid implementing the death penalty (Mishnah Makkot 1:10).¹ Even within a single religious tradition, conversations about killing are not as clear cut as they may at first appear.

Dr John Kelsay, a noted academic of religious ethics, prefers to translate ‘Thou shalt not kill’ using the term ‘murder’ rather than ‘kill’. Homicide is certainly the only form of killing that seems to attract universal disapprobation, but as we seek to define homicide or murder, we realise that even here we have problems in identifying the boundaries. Abortion, suicide, euthanasia and capital punishment are among a number of methods of killing that attract titles both of ‘murder’ and more sanitised nomenclature, depending on the perspective of the audience. Further, should these debates be limited to consideration of human beings? Some animal rights groups apply the idea of homicide to acts against other animals, as demonstrated by the slogan, ‘meat is murder’. Noted British theologian and ethicist Andrew Linzey holds that we do not have the right to kill animals because life is not ours for the taking: life belongs to God. What and who determines whether one form of killing is acceptable while another is morally reprehensible?

In this book, we examine specific instances of killing people and analyse these with the intention of informing readers, ideally encouraging an examination of our own ethical beliefs. One may take comfort in separating ‘good’ people from ‘bad’ people (Zimbardo 2007), but such separation is not as straightforward as it may at first appear. Zimbardo suggests an alternative conception of evil ‘in *incrementalist* terms, as something of which we are all capable, depending on circumstances’ (*ibid.*: 7, emphasis in original). He explains that his research into human behaviour in the Stanford Prison Experiment (1972) showed that ‘The line between Good and Evil, once thought to be impermeable, proved instead to be quite permeable’ (2007: 195).

1 “A Sanhedrin that puts one person to death once in seven years is called destructive. Rabbi Eliezer ben Azariah says: Or even once in seventy years. Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva say: Had we been the Sanhedrin, none would ever have been put to death.” Mishnah Makkot, 1:10

Early experiments such as those by Stanley Milgram (1974) show that virtually all of us are willing to behave in ways we never thought possible, given the right context or authoritative instruction. Events such as the Holocaust and the massacre at My Lai bring this aspect of human behaviour into sharp relief. How many of us can realistically believe that we would never support or facilitate the act of killing? We may not view ourselves as breaking any moral law; we may not go out and kill people we see on the street nor define ourselves as ‘killers,’ but we can be caught in complex, often confusing social interactions regarding the act.

The topics for this book were chosen specifically to encourage thought about such questions and to deal with such inconsistencies. We invited authors across social science and humanities disciplines to contribute, as we wished to share the approaches of different disciplines and to facilitate trans-theoretical debate. The editors come from distinct theoretical backgrounds and have been motivated to find synergy in drawing on each other’s strengths, and on how similar our techniques can be, despite the different language we adopt.

Notwithstanding this, we recognise the complexity of both intra-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary debate, particularly in topics as potentially emotive and politically charged as those we consider here. In defence of such an approach, Zimbardo notes that:

...most psychologists have been insensitive to the deeper sources of power that inhere in the political, economic, religious, historic, and cultural matrix that defines situations and gives them legitimate or illegitimate existence. A full understanding of the dynamics of human behavior requires that we recognize the extent and limits of personal power, situational power, and systemic power.
(2007: x)

We hope that readers will embrace the challenges posed herein and will agree that this varied approach benefits rather than detracts from the text. We believe the book will remain relevant in years to come as the topics and the manner in which they are discussed contribute to present and future debates in this field.

Governments have killed for thousands of years, while at the same time their laws have prohibited individuals from taking similar actions, under most circumstances. A report by Amnesty International (1989) called *When the State Kills* – a title later used in other publications on capital punishment including Sarat (2002), emphasised the inconsistency between teaching people that killing is wrong whilst making it an acceptable action when the faceless entity of ‘the state’ does it for us. How do we deal with these inconsistencies? In the United States, the Supreme Court often cites evolving standards of decency

as one way to provide such answers. Its decision in 2005 to prohibit capital punishment for those who were juveniles when they committed their crimes is one example of such action.² However the United States is one of the very few Western countries that continues to utilise capital punishment at all. Are further discrepancies at work here?

Another dilemma that did not confront our predecessors involves advances in medical technology. The euthanasia case of Terri Schiavo provides an example that is relatively new to us (see Chapter 5). Medical advances now allow us to keep individuals alive who would otherwise die, so was Schiavo allowed to die or was she killed? Similarly, in France Chantal Sebire petitioned for the right to die due to a rare illness that left her face disfigured and caused extreme pain, yet her government denied her wish. Was this morally correct? Unlike Schiavo, Sebire did not suffer mental incapacitation and reasoned that she had the right to choose death. French law disagreed.

This book examines these and other dilemmas. Why do some people condone abortion yet oppose the death penalty? Why do some condemn suicide yet view the death of suicide bombers as martyrdom? What compels people to take hundreds of schoolchildren and their families hostage in Beslan, draping them in fuse wire and detonators (McAllister and Quinn-Judge 2004)? How could anyone strap explosive devices to two women with learning difficulties and blow them up, along with over 90 bystanders in a crowded Baghdad market (Fletcher 2008)? Why do ordinary people participate in such extraordinary acts of violence and killing as the Rwandan Genocide (www.rwanda-genocide.org)? What does this say about us collectively and individually?

At first glance, the varied types of killing seem largely unrelated, despite the common outcome. We argue that all of us have the potential to kill; many if not most of us probably condone it in some form or another, depending on how we define it and justify it according to our moral code. This is the common thread: something about a moral code, a religious or ethical belief enmeshed within a cultural context, determines one's stance on various types of killing and, indeed, on inhibitors to killing. Further, social context and circumstances can challenge this stance beyond what each individual ever thought possible.

This book intends to address the violence of killing in its contextual, multi-layered and complex manifestations, taking into account how culture plays a pivotal role in understanding violent action yet also remembering the peaceful emphases of various religious and cultural traditions. Each chapter begins with a brief introduction from the editors to help tie the themes together. The

2 Roper v Simmons (03-633) 543 US 551 (2005) 112 SW 3d.

chapters discuss various forms of killing and reasons behind these, moving through the spectrum of those which attract universal approbation (for example homicide, serial killing) to those protected by law (capital punishment, abortion) to those that are even venerated (killing in the context of war).

The epilogue draws the themes from the book together, this time with the benefit of the examples put forward in each chapter. We again discuss the common thread we highlighted at the outset: that religious or ethical belief enmeshed within a cultural context determines one's stance on various types of killing and, indeed, on inhibitors to killing. In this attempt to answer the question of why we kill, we do not expect to resolve these differences in moral or religious belief. Rather we hope to increase understanding of them and, in turn, to encourage an examination of our own beliefs.

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