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<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2973-8503> (2009) Why we kill: understanding violence across cultures and disciplines. Loucks, Nancy and Smith Holt, Sally and Adler, Joanna R., eds. Middlesex University Press, London. ISBN 9781904750420. [Book]

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why
we

kill

why we kill

**understanding violence across
cultures and disciplines**

edited by

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



First published in 2009 by Middlesex University Press

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ISBN 978 1 904750 42 0

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
The British Library

Design by Helen Taylor

Printed in the UK by \$\$\$\$\$\$

Middlesex University Press
Fenella Building
The Burroughs
Hendon
London NW4 4BT

Tel: +44 (0)20 8411 4162

Fax: +44 (0)20 8411 4167

www.mupress.co.uk

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has come together during the course of an extraordinary number of personal and professional challenges for all of us. We would therefore like to thank both our families and especially our participating authors for their tremendous patience, their perseverance, and for their faith in the project. We hope our efforts were worthwhile.

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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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