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# Christian Fundamentalism and Support for Capital Punishment

James D. Unnever  
*Mississippi State University*  
Francis T. Cullen  
*University of Cincinnati*

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Few public policy issues have inflamed passions as consistently and as strongly as the debate over capital punishment. Religious denominations have been deeply involved on both sides of the issue, drawing both on teachings and traditions of justice and on those that emphasize the dignity of human life. Scholarly researchers have investigated the role that religious beliefs play in shaping sentiments toward crime control policies, with a particular focus on the relationship between belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination and support for the death penalty. Researchers have reasoned that Christian fundamentalists should be more likely to support capital punishment than other more moderate denominations because they hold conservative religious beliefs that justify the use of the death penalty. Using 1998 data from the General Social Survey, the authors initially show that contrary to common views, Christian fundamentalist affiliation is unrelated to support for capital punishment. Subsequent analyses reveal, however, that this null relationship is not straightforward but complex: fundamentalists embrace certain religious beliefs and involvement that both increase and decrease punitiveness. The study thus suggests that understanding the impact of religion on crime control attitudes potentially requires disentangling countervailing effects of different features of religiosity.

**Keywords:** *death penalty; Christian fundamentalism; punitiveness*

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**Authors' Note:** We thank Tom Smith and Christopher G. Ellison for their insights on an earlier draft of this article. Address correspondence to James D. Unnever, Department of Sociology, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS, 39762; e-mail: [junnever@msstate.edu](mailto:junnever@msstate.edu).

ings and traditions of justice and on those that emphasize the dignity of human life (Pew Forum on Religion and Life 2003). Despite this deep involvement, the role that religious beliefs have in defining the level of support for capital punishment has not been clearly identified. Most of the research has investigated whether the relatively high level of support for capital punishment within the United States is related to the religious beliefs expressed by individuals who endorse Christian fundamentalism. Researchers have reasoned that Christian fundamentalists should be more likely to support the death penalty than members of more moderate denominations because they have a unique set of religious beliefs that justify punitive correctional policies (Grasmick, Bursik, and Blackwell 1993; Grasmick, Cochran, et al. 1993; Grasmick and McGill 1994).

However, a new image of Christian fundamentalism is emerging that counters the narrow portrayal of fundamentalists being Bible thumping, “hell and brimstone,” social conservatives who oppose all liberal programs with one voice (Gallagher 2004). For example, a recent issue of *U.S. News & World Report* had “New” evangelicals on its cover, and the magazine’s special report was titled, “Evangelicals defy easy labels. Here’s why—and why their numbers are growing The New Old-Time Religion” (Tolson 2003). In addition, a recent edition of the *American Prospect* featured an article on Christian fundamentalists with the title, “Reaching to the Choir: Think all evangelicals are right-wingers? Don’t believe everything you read. Just as many are politically moderate. Can democrats win their votes? God only knows, it’s worth a try” (McGarvey 2003). These new portrayals question the academic rendering of Christian fundamentalism as the foundation of support for conservative national policies such as the death penalty. In this context, it is possible that many fundamentalists’ views toward capital punishment mirror those held by members of more mainstream denominations that are rooted in a more progressive theological tradition.

In this article, we investigate a number of interrelated questions that taken together, have the potential to unravel the complex relationships between being a Christian fundamentalist, religious beliefs, religious salience, and attitudes toward the death penalty. First, we explore whether Christian fundamentalists are more likely to support capital punishment than other more moderate and liberal denominations while controlling for relevant factors. Second, we investigate the relationship between being a Christian fundamentalist and a number of religious beliefs, including interpreting the Bible literally, having a harsh hierarchal image of God, compassion, and forgiveness. Third, we consider the relationship between belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination, religious beliefs, and the importance that individuals attach to religion. Finally, we examine the relationships between sup-

port for the death penalty, religious salience, religious beliefs, and whether the individual belonged to a Christian fundamentalist denomination.

### **Are Christian Fundamentalists More Likely to Support Capital Punishment?**

Scholars have suggested that Christian fundamentalists have unique religious beliefs that should cause them to be more supportive of the death penalty than members of more moderate or liberal denominations. Greeley (1995) argues that Christian fundamentalists tend to have religious stories—that is, images of God—that produce a rigid, harsh, and moralistic religious orientation. He attributes this religious orientation to “Reformation skepticism” about God imagery. Greeley (1995:253) further suggests that Christian fundamentalists, particularly Southern Baptists, have not only kept alive the theology of the Reformation, but they have also sustained the moral rigidity, the self-righteous religious style, and the harsh religious imagery that marked some of the Reformers.

The fundamentalist hierarchal image of God is consistent with their belief that the Bible should be interpreted as the literal word of God. A literal interpretation of the Bible assumes that the Bible is unitary and inerrant, and that scripture contains necessary and sufficient information to guide the conduct of all human affairs (Ellison and Musick 1993; Ellison and Sherkat 1993a; Ellison and Sherkat 1993b). Christian fundamentalists also recognize the authority of religious leaders and are willing to accept their interpretation of biblical passages (Ellison and Musick 1993; Grasmick, Cochran, et al. 1993). Ellison and Sherkat (1993a) argue that the willingness of Christian fundamentalists to accept the authority of religious leaders mirrors their acceptance of authority in human institutions.

Christian fundamentalists also believe in the doctrine of original sin and further equate criminal behavior with sinful behavior (Curry 1996). The belief that criminal behavior is sinful behavior allows Christian fundamentalists to endorse the view that crime results from the offender’s character and not from unfortunate or unjust conditions (Grasmick and McGill 1994). Therefore, Christian fundamentalists have little doubt as to what should happen to criminals: Biblical passages mandate that sinful behavior should be swiftly and decisively punished (Ellison and Shekrat 1993a; Grasmick and McGill 1994).

In sum, a belief in a hierarchal punitive God who has mandated that sinful behavior should be decisively punished provides Christian fundamentalists with religious justifications for believing that convicted murderers should be put to death. The belief that individuals choose to engage in crime and there-

fore deserve to be punished further justifies supporting capital punishment. Finally, the Christian fundamentalists' acceptance of authority allows them to believe that state-sanctioned capital punishment is a legitimate use of force.

Researchers have found that members of Christian fundamentalist denominations are more likely to support the death penalty. Most recently, two studies found that belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination, as defined by Smith's (1990) classification scheme, positively predicted support for capital punishment. Stack (2003) analyzed data from the General Social Survey (GSS) for the years 1985 and 1990 and discovered that respondents who belonged to a Christian fundamentalist denomination were more likely to support the death penalty, while controlling for other covariates. Young (2000) assessed three years of the GSS—1985, 1990, and 1996—and reported that belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination was significantly correlated with support for the death penalty at the bivariate level. Other scholars have found a direct relationship between Christian fundamentalism and support for capital punishment (see, e.g., Grasmick, Bursik, et al. 1993; Grasmick and McGill 1994; Young 1992).

Other scholars, however, have failed to uncover a positive relationship between support for the death penalty and Christian fundamentalism. Sandys and McGarrell (1997) analyzed data from Indiana that included two indicators of Christian fundamentalism—belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination and believing that the Bible is the literal word of God—and found that neither predicted greater support for capital punishment. In addition, Soss, Langbein, and Metelko (2003) examined data collected in 1992 by the National Election Study (NES), which included a self-report measure of being a Christian fundamentalist, and found that it was insignificantly related to support for capital punishment, while controlling for other covariates. Also, Baumer, Messner, and Rosenfeld (2003) found a null relationship between belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination and support for capital punishment after pooling the GSS for the years 1974 to 1998. It is also instructive that researchers report that the effect of a religious belief associated with Christian fundamentalism, encouraging people to accept Jesus Christ as their savior, varies across race, with African American "evangelicals" significantly more likely to *oppose* capital punishment (see, e.g., Young 1992; Young and Thompson 1995).

In sum, we draw the following conclusions from the extant research on Christian fundamentalism and public support for the death penalty. Note that our conclusions parallel those suggested by Unnever, Cullen, and Applegate (2005). First, some studies show that Christian fundamentalism does not predict greater support for capital punishment regardless of the variables used to

measure Christian fundamentalism (e.g., belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination, biblical literalism, self-report being a fundamentalist). Second, the research that has investigated whether the association between Christian fundamentalism and support for the death penalty varies across specific populations has generated inconsistent results. For example, Borg (1997) reports that Christian fundamentalism predicted greater support for the death penalty among Whites who resided in the South. By contrast, Young and Thompson (1995) report that among African Americans, belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination predicts *opposition* to capital punishment. Third, the previous research investigating whether Christian fundamentalist beliefs positively predict greater support for the death penalty has also generated mixed results. For example, some research shows that literalism positively predicts and evangelicalism negatively predicts support for capital punishment. Finally, even when a study shows a direct relationship, the magnitude of the fundamentalism coefficient and its statistical significance are marginal—that is, the relationship between Christian fundamentalism and support for capital punishment is of little substantive importance.

In this article, we further investigate whether Christian fundamentalists are more likely to support capital punishment than members of more moderate and liberal denominations. We also, at the end of the article, discuss possible reasons for why the research on the relationship between support for the death penalty and Christian fundamentalism has generated mixed results.

### **Christian Fundamentalists, Compassion and Forgiveness, and Support for Capital Punishment**

Most of the existing research has narrowly focused on elucidating the relationship between being a Christian fundamentalist and support for “get tough” crime-control policies. Thus, researchers have focused on establishing the relationships among being a Christian fundamentalist, conservative religious beliefs such as biblical literalism, having a harsh hierarchical image of God, and support for capital punishment. However, Applegate et al. (2000) and Unnever et al. (2005) have argued that this relatively narrow focus has been at the expense of identifying the more compassionate aspects of religion and whether they predict opposition to the death penalty.

These scholars have identified two religious beliefs that predict opposition to the death penalty, forgiveness and compassion (Applegate et al. 2000; Unnever et al. 2005). Forgiveness is overcoming the “negative affect and judgment toward the offender, not by denying ourselves the right to such

affect and judgment, but by endeavoring to view the offender with compassion, benevolence, and love while recognizing that he or she has abandoned the right to harm them" (Enright, Gassin, and Wu 1992:101). Unnever et al. (2005) define compassion as "the empathetic understanding of the suffering of others facilitated by an awareness of one's own suffering."

Applegate et al. (2000) administered a single-state survey that included a scale measuring forgiveness (we should "hate the sin" but "love the sinner," forgiveness is required, and forgiveness is limitless as long as the offender repents) and found that it negatively predicted support for the death penalty while controlling for other covariates, including measures of Christian fundamentalism. Unnever et al. (2005) add to the research by Applegate et al. (2000) by arguing that a secular belief, with strong ties to most religious beliefs, compassion may also negatively predict support for the death penalty. They report, using the 1998 GSS, that both forgiveness and compassion were negatively associated with support for capital punishment. They concluded that religion has divergent effects; it produces beliefs (e.g., having a harsh hierarchal image of God) that shape punitive crime-control policies and it generates beliefs (e.g., compassion) that are supportive of more progressive views toward crime and its control.

Applegate et al. (2000) and Unnever et al. (2005) present rather convincing evidence that models explaining public opinion about the death penalty may be misspecified if they do not include measures of forgiveness and compassion. However, the extant research, to our knowledge, has failed to investigate whether members of Christian fundamentalist denominations are more likely to express these beliefs than members of other religious denominations.

It could be argued that Christian fundamentalists are compelled to express compassionate and forgiving beliefs because these sentiments are found throughout the Bible. It is also possible that forgiveness and compassion, although central to Christianity, are not core beliefs held by Christian fundamentalists. Using the 1998 GSS data, we test whether compassion and forgiveness are positively related to belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination. We also examine whether these religious beliefs are related to religious salience and support for the death penalty.

### **Christian Fundamentalists, Religious Salience, and Support for Capital Punishment**

Scholars have argued that models examining the relationship between belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination and support for the

death penalty are misspecified if they do not include measures of religious salience. Applegate et al. (2000) propose that such models would be misspecified because Christian fundamentalists attach a greater importance to religion in guiding their daily lives than do nonfundamentalists and, in turn, the degree to which religion is salient in a person's life should influence their support of capital punishment. Thus, for two reasons, the current research includes a measure of how strongly individuals identify with and practice their religion. First, we include religious salience as a control variable because it could confound the relationship between Christian fundamentalism and support for the death penalty. Second, we explore whether the relationship between religious salience and support for capital punishment could, in part, explain why the research on Christian fundamentalism and support for the death penalty has generated inconsistent conclusions.

The most consistent finding generated by the research on religion and support for the death penalty is that the more individuals identify with and practice their religion, the less likely they are to support "get tough" crime-control policies (Applegate et al. 2000; Grasmick, Bursik, et al. 1993; Grasmick, Cochran, et al. 1993; Young 1992). However, while researchers consistently report that there is a negative relationship between religious salience and support for the death penalty, they have not put forth an account for why this negative relationship exists; nor have they fully explored the relationships among being a Christian fundamentalist having a strong religious practice and support for the death penalty.

In summary, we present a series of sequential models that attempt to clarify the relationships among being a Christian fundamentalist, conservative and compassionate religious beliefs, religious salience, and support for capital punishment. Our first model regresses support for capital punishment on membership in a Christian fundamentalist denomination and the control variables. The second model regresses four divergent religious beliefs, biblical literalism, having a hierarchal image of God, compassion, and forgiveness on whether the individual belonged to a Christian fundamentalist denomination. The third model regresses the strength of the individual's religious practice on the four religious beliefs and membership in a Christian fundamentalist denomination. Our full regression equation regresses support for the death penalty on strength of the individual's religious practice, compassion, forgiveness, biblical literalism, whether the individual belonged to a Christian fundamentalist denomination, and having a harsh hierarchal image of God. In the end, our analyses generate a complex picture that addresses whether Christian fundamentalists are, indeed, more likely to support the death penalty.



## Method

### Data

The data we analyzed are from the 1998 GSS, which is conducted by the National Opinion Research Center. The GSS is a replicated cross-sectional survey that is based on a representative sample of adults residing within the United States. We purposively selected the 1998 GSS because it is the only year that includes a broad range of variables that measure different aspects of religion and spirituality, which we highlight in this research. For example, the 1998 GSS contains measures regularly included in the GSS such as whether respondents belong to a Christian fundamentalist denomination and whether they interpret the Bible literally. However, it also includes two modules focusing on different aspects of religious beliefs and practices. Accordingly, the 1998 GSS presents the opportunity to assess the relationship between belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination, compassion, forgiveness, and public support for the death penalty while controlling for other religious beliefs and practices as well as other correlates of support for capital punishment.

### Variables

*Support for the death penalty.* The GSS contains one measure that assesses support for capital punishment. Respondents were asked whether they favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder. The response categories included “favor,” “oppose,” and “don’t know.” A binary measure, Death Penalty (1 = favor, 0 = other), was constructed and 73 percent of the respondents reported that they favor the use of the death penalty for persons convicted of murder.<sup>1</sup> The extant research has often used the GSS and its binary measure on public support for the death penalty (see, e.g., Baumer et al. 2003; Borg 1997, 1998; Stack 2000, 2003; Young 2000). Notably, Unnever and Cullen (2005) found that variables, which often predict support for a yes-no death penalty question, also predicted respondents’ choosing the death penalty over the alternative of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole.

*Christian fundamentalists.* We used the classification scheme developed by Smith (1990), denoting whether respondents belonged to a Christian fundamentalist denomination to construct, Fundamentalist Church. Those belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination were coded 1, and those belonging to moderate or liberal denominations were coded 0.

*Conservative religious beliefs.* We include two measures to assess whether the respondents held conservative Protestant beliefs usually identified with Christian fundamentalism. Our first measure is a dummy variable, Literalist, and it identifies persons who endorsed biblical literalism. Briefly, GSS respondents were presented with three possible interpretive positions concerning the Bible, and they were asked to choose the view closest to their own. Individuals who agreed “the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word” are coded as literalists (1 = literalist, 0 = other). Our second measure, Harsh God, is whether individuals had a harsh hierarchical image of God. To create this measure, we first reproduced Greeley’s (1993, 1995) “grace scale” by summing across the responses to a set of four semantic differential items in the GSS (see Unnever et al. 2005). Respondents were shown a card with sets of contrasting images, and they were asked to place their image of God between the two images on a scale of 1 to 7. The relevant sets of images were as follows: (a) mother versus father, (b) master versus spouse, (c) judge versus lover, and (d) king versus friend. We reverse coded Greeley’s grace scale to assess whether the individual had a harsh hierarchical image of God. Thus, individuals who score high on the Harsh God scale tend to have an image of God as being a father, master, judge, and king. The alpha coefficient for our Harsh God scale is .61. A factor analysis of the four semantic differential items generated a single factor.

*Forgiveness.* Our scale measuring forgiveness was constructed by summing across responses to three items that were included in the 1998 GSS. Respondents were queried as to how often their religious or spiritual beliefs have led them: (a) to forgive themselves for things they have done wrong, (b) to forgive others who hurt them, and (c) to know that God forgives them. For each item, responses range from (1) never to (5) always or almost always. Higher scores on Forgiveness indicate that respondents were more forgiving. The alpha coefficient for Forgiveness was .65. A factor analysis of the three forgiveness items generated a single factor. As mentioned earlier, Applegate et al. (2000) and Unnever et al. (2005) found that people who were more forgiving were less likely to support capital punishment.

*Compassion.* We used a single-item as our measure of compassion: “I feel a deep sense of responsibility for reducing pain and suffering in the world.” Responses were recoded to range from (1) strongly disagree to (4) strongly agree. We recognize that compassion can be both a secular and religious belief. For example, we consider the use of compassion in the phrase “compassionate conservative” as more of a secular than a religious use of the term

(Wang 1999). Compassion has been found to negatively predict support for the death penalty (Unnever et al. 2005).

*Religious Salience.* Our measure of religious salience, Salience, is a scale composed of the following six questions: (a) "To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?" (b) "To what extent do you consider yourself a spiritual person?" (c) "I try hard to carry my religious beliefs over into all my other dealings in life." (d) "How often do you pray privately in places other than at church or synagogue?" (e) "About how often do you pray?" (f) "Within your religious or spiritual tradition, how often do you meditate?" The responses on the scale ranged from 6 to 34 with higher values indicating greater religious salience. The alpha coefficient for Salience was .86. A factor analysis of the salience items generated a single factor.

*Political measures.* We investigated three variables related to respondents' attitudes toward salient political issues other than the death penalty. Our first measure, School Prayer, is a binary variable constructed from the following question: "The United States Supreme Court has ruled that no state or local government may *require* the reading of the Lord's Prayer or Bible verses in public schools. What are your views on this—do you approve or disapprove of the court ruling?" School Prayer was recoded so that 1 = disapproved and 0 = approved. We also included a binary variable, Abortion, based on the following question: "Please tell me whether or not *you* think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a *legal* abortion if the woman wants it for any reason?" Abortion was recoded so that 1 = disapproved and 0 = approved. Our last variable is a scale, Civil Liberties, that measures the degree to which individuals supported the civil liberties of gays and lesbians. The following three questions were used to construct the scale. (a) "And what about a man who admits that he is a homosexual? Suppose this admitted homosexual wanted to make a speech in your community. Should he be allowed to speak, or not?" (b) "Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college or university, or not?" (c) "If some people in your community suggested that a book he wrote in favor of homosexuality should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?" The responses to these questions were recoded so that higher values indicate that respondents opposed the civil liberties of gays and lesbians. The scale, Civil Liberties, ranged from 0 to 3 and its alpha coefficient was .78. A factor analysis of the three items indicated that one factor should be retained.

## Controls

As controls, we included variables that research has identified as significant predictors of support for the death penalty. We include these measures because they could confound the relationship between the two variables of concern here, support for the death penalty and belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination.

The previous research indicates that one of the most consistent predictors of support for the death penalty is race, with African Americans significantly less likely to support capital punishment (see, e.g., Bobo and Johnson 2004). We included a measure of race, African American (1 = African American, 0 = other). Research has also reported regional differences with southern White fundamentalists expressing higher levels of support for the death penalty (e.g., Borg 1997). We created a measure, Southerner, that assesses whether respondents resided in the south when they were 16 years old and were living in the south when the interview was conducted (1 = southerner, 0 = all others). Other researchers have used similar measures to predict punitiveness (Borg 1997; Ellison and Sherkat 1993a, 1993b; Stack 2003). We also controlled for gender (Gender, 1 = male, 0 = female) because past studies have reported that males are more likely to support the death penalty (see, e.g., Evans and Adams 2003).

In addition, we controlled for the respondent's level of education, Education (years completed). Research has reported that higher education negatively predicts support for the death penalty (Soss et al. 2003; Stack 2003). Moreover, we control for the respondent's subjective class identification, Social Class (scale ranging from 1 = lower class to 4 = upper class). Scholars suggest that measures of class should negatively predict support for the death penalty because low-income people may perceive that they have a greater probability of encountering the costs of more punitive sentences (Soss et al. 2003). However, researchers mainly report a null or weak relationship between measures of class and support for capital punishment (Applegate et al. 2000; Evans and Adams 2003; Stack 2003; Young and Thompson 1995).

An additional consistent predictor of greater support for the death penalty is political conservatism (see, e.g., Unnever and Cullen 2005). Our measure of the political orientation of the respondents, Political Conservative, was based on the following question: "We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal—point 1—to extremely conservative—point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?" The responses ranged from 1 to 7, with higher values

indicating greater conservatism. Last, we control for Age (measured in years) because it has been shown to be negatively related to punitiveness (Evans and Adams 2003), and we include Foreigner (1 = not born in U.S., 0 = born in U.S.), indicating whether respondents were born outside the United States. Unnever et al. (2005) report that being foreign born, a growing percentage of the U.S. population, negatively predicts support for the death penalty.

### **Analytical Strategy**

We used binary logistic regression if our dependent variables were dichotomous (Death Penalty, Literal, School Prayer, and Abortion), ordinal regression if the dependent variable had four categories (Compassion and Civil Liberties), and ordinary least squares when we analyzed scales (Salience, 29 values, Forgiveness, 10 values, and Harsh God, 24 values). Odds ratios and their confidence limits are reported for the binary logistic regression analyses, parameter estimates and their standard errors are reported for the ordinal-regression analyses, and standardized regression coefficients and their standard errors are reported for the ordinary least squares analyses. Using LISREL 8.50 for Windows and the EM algorithm (Schafer 1997), we substituted values for missing cases. The EM algorithm generated values based on a data set that included the variables used in the present analysis. All analyses were run with and without missing cases; the results did not differ substantively. After imputing values for the missing cases, the sample included 1,445 respondents.

## **Results**

We begin our analysis by presenting a cross-tabulation of the percentage of GSS respondents who supported capital punishment by year and by denomination. Based on the classification system developed by Smith (1990), three denominations are included: fundamentalist, moderate, and liberal. Table 1 shows a clear and consistent pattern; Christian fundamentalists were not more supportive of the death penalty when compared to members affiliated with more moderate and liberal denominations. It is also instructive that the zero-order correlation between support for the death penalty and belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination is nonsignificant ( $-.019, p = .46$ ) when examining the 1998 GSS.

The regression equation in Table 2 investigates whether Christian fundamentalists were more likely to support capital punishment than members of other more moderate or liberal denominations while controlling for other

**Table 1**  
**Analysis of the General Social Survey: Support for Capital Punishment by Religious Affiliation by Year**

Year	Fundamentalist	Moderate	Liberal
1974	62.0	72.4	57.6
1975	56.5	70.1	61.6
1976	64.7	72.4	65.2
1977	67.5	75.8	66.8
1978	66.1	73.5	70.0
1980	68.7	74.5	70.3
1982	63.1	77.9	78.0
1983	74.9	77.2	78.8
1984	71.9	76.5	75.8
1985	80.7	78.6	80.2
1986	73.4	76.2	76.6
1987	62.7	72.4	77.2
1988	74.2	78.3	77.8
1989	78.3	77.8	79.1
1990	78.7	81.4	79.1
1991	76.2	78.1	74.4
1993	79.7	75.5	77.2
1994	80.0	79.5	79.8
1996	77.8	75.4	78.3
1998	72.5	74.7	73.4
2000	69.0	71.7	67.5
All cases	71.8	75.6	74.3

**Table 2**  
**A Binary Logistic Regression Analysis of the Relationship between Support for Capital Punishment and Fundamentalist Denomination Affiliation (odds ratios and confidence limits in parentheses)**

Variable	Result	
Age	1.00	(.99-1.01)
African American	.24***	(.17-.35)
Gender (male = 1)	1.35*	(1.04-1.73)
Born outside United States	.61**	(.41-.90)
Education	.96	(.92-1.01)
Social class	1.04	(.85-1.27)
Political conservative	1.18***	(1.07-1.29)
Native southerner	1.44**	(1.07-1.96)
Fundamentalist	1.02	(.75-1.38)
Model chi-square	107.01***	
Correctly classified	66.6	

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

factors. The results show that individuals who belonged to a Christian fundamentalist denomination were not more likely to support the death penalty than nonfundamentalists. The results also show that African Americans and individuals born outside the United States were significantly less likely to support capital punishment, whereas males, native southerners, and political conservatives were significantly more likely to support the death penalty.

Table 3 assesses whether Christian fundamentalists hold divergent religious beliefs. Model 1 of Table 3 investigates whether Christian fundamentalists were more likely to interpret the Bible literally and Model 2 examines whether Christian fundamentalists were more likely to have a harsher hierarchal image of God than members of more moderate denominations. Model 3 of Table 3 considers whether Christian fundamentalists expressed more forgiving attitudes, and Model 4 explores whether Christian fundamentalists held more compassionate beliefs than members of more moderate or liberal denominations.

Model 1 of Table 3 indicates that Christian fundamentalists were substantially more likely to interpret the Bible literally. The predicted odds of a Christian fundamentalist being a biblical literalist were over four times the predicted odds of nonfundamentalists. The results also show that African Americans, individuals born outside the United States, political conservatives, and native southerners were more likely to interpret the Bible literally. Males and the more educated were less likely to be biblical literalists. The results from Model 2 of Table 3 show that Christian fundamentalists were significantly more likely to have a harsher hierarchal image of God than nonfundamentalists. Similar to the results regarding biblical literalists, individuals who had a harsh hierarchal image of God tended to be African American, politically conservative, and native southerners. In addition, age positively predicted having a harsher hierarchal image of God.

The results from Models 1 and 2 of Table 3 indicate that Christian fundamentalists hold more religiously conservative beliefs than nonfundamentalists. The results presented in Models 3 and 4 of Table 3 address whether Christian fundamentalists not only hold conservative religious beliefs but also express beliefs more closely identified with the compassionate and loving aspects of religion. Model 3 presents an ordinary least squares regression analysis of whether forgiving individuals were more likely to belong to Christian fundamentalist denominations, and Model 4 presents an ordinal regression analysis of whether compassionate individuals were more likely to affiliate with a Christian fundamentalist denomination. Forgiveness and compassion were coded so that higher values indicate that respondents expressed more forgiving or more compassionate beliefs.

**Table 3**  
**Regression Analyses of the Relationship between Fundamentalist Denomination Affiliation and Biblical Literalism, Harsh Hierarchical Image of God, Forgiveness, and Compassion**

Variable	Model 1 Biblical Literalism	Model 2 Harsh Image of God	Model 3 Forgiveness	Model 4 Compassion
Age	1.00 (.99-1.01)	.05* (.00)	.08*** (.00)	.00*** (-.00-.01)
African American	1.45* (1.02-2.07)	.05* (.38)	.07** (.14)	-.10 (-.40-.18)
Gender (male = 1)	.75* (.58-.97)	-.00 (.25)	-.12*** (.09)	-.28** (-.47 --.08)
Born outside the United States	1.88** (1.22-2.90)	-.00 (.43)	.01 (.16)	-.02 (-.37-.32)
Education	.83*** (.79-.88)	-.01 (.04)	.02 (.01)	.05*** (.02-.09)
Social class	.92 (.75-1.13)	-.02 (.20)	.05 (.07)	.07 (-.08-.23)
Political conservative	1.20*** (1.09-1.33)	.18*** (.09)	.07** (.03)	-.01 (-.08-.05)
Native southerner	1.38* (1.04-1.82)	.07** (.29)	.07** (.11)	-.00 (-.22-.22)
Fundamentalist	4.33*** (3.29-5.69)	.13** (.29)	.14*** (.11)	.35** (.12-.58)
Model chi-square	303.81***			32.31***
Correctly classified	77.6			
F value		15.06***	14.01***	
R <sup>2</sup>		.08	.08	.02

Note: Model 1 is a binary logistic regression equation with odds ratios and confidence limits in parentheses. Models 2 and 3 are ordinary least squares regression equations with standardized estimates and standard errors in parentheses. Model 4 is an ordinal regression with estimates and confidence limits in parentheses. The Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup> is presented for the ordinal regression equation.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



**Table 4**  
**Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis of the Relationship**  
**between Religious Salience and Fundamentalist Denomination**  
**Affiliation (standardized estimates and**  
**standard errors in parentheses)**

Variable	Result	
Age	.15***	(.00)
African American	.12***	(.47)
Gender (male = 1)	-.11***	(.31)
Born outside United States	.03	(.53)
Education	.07***	(.05)
Social class	-.01	(.24)
Political conservative	.05**	(.11)
Native southerner	.05**	(.35)
Biblical literalist	.18***	(.37)
Harsh image of God	-.01	(.03)
Forgiveness	.32***	(.08)
Compassion	.22***	(.19)
Fundamentalist	.07**	(.38)
<i>F</i> value	72.64***	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.39	

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

The results from Model 3 of Table 3 show that Christian fundamentalists were significantly more likely to express forgiving beliefs than nonfundamentalists. The results also indicate that forgiving individuals tended to be older, African American, female, politically conservative, and native southerners. Model 4 of Table 3 shows that Christian fundamentalists were not only more likely to express forgiving beliefs but they also were more likely to hold compassionate beliefs. The results from Model 4 further indicate that compassionate individuals tended to be older, tended to be female, and had higher levels of education.

Table 4 assesses whether Christian fundamentalists had a more rigorous religious practice than members of more moderate denominations. It also investigates the relationships between religious beliefs and religious salience. The results of the ordinary least squares analysis show that Christian fundamentalists were significantly more likely to have stronger religious practices than members of more moderate or liberal denominations. Notably, the results also show that biblical literalism, forgiveness, and compassion significantly predicted religious salience, with forgiveness, compassion, and biblical literalism having the strongest relationship, respectively. Thus, individuals with a more rigorous religious practice were more likely to express

**Table 5**  
**Binary Logistic Regression Analysis of the Relationship between**  
**Support for Capital Punishment and Fundamentalist Denomination**  
**Affiliation (odds ratios and confidence limits in parentheses)**

Variable	Result	
Age	1.00	(.99-1.01)
African American	.25***	(.17-.36)
Gender (male = 1)	1.16	(.89-1.51)
Born outside United States	.63*	(.41-.95)
Education	.98	(.94-1.03)
Social class	1.08	(.88-1.32)
Political conservative	1.16**	(1.05-1.28)
Native southerner	1.55**	(1.13-2.12)
Biblical literalist	1.06	(.77-1.45)
Harsh image of God	1.06***	(1.03-1.09)
Forgiveness	.94	(.86-1.02)
Compassion	.76**	(.64-.91)
Religious salience	.95***	(.93-.98)
Fundamentalist	1.07	(.80-1.53)
Chi-square	181.08***	
Correctly classified	72.3	

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

forgiving beliefs, be more compassionate, and interpret the Bible literally. In addition, the results show that individuals who had a strong religious practice tended to be older, African American, female, more educated, born outside the United States, politically conservative, and native southerners.

Table 5 presents our full binary logistic regression equation. It assesses whether Christian fundamentalists were more likely to support capital punishment, whether individuals who support the death penalty held divergent religious beliefs, and the relationship between religious salience and support for capital punishment. The results from Table 5 show that Christian fundamentalists were not more likely to support the death penalty than members of more moderate denominations while controlling for the other variables in the equation.<sup>2</sup> Table 5 also indicates that two religious beliefs significantly predicted support for capital punishment: having a harsh image of God and compassion. However, the relationships were in opposite directions; individuals who had a harsh hierarchal image of God were more likely and those who were compassionate were less likely to support the death penalty. The results further show that the stronger an individual's religious practice, the less likely they were to support capital punishment.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Table 5 indicates that individuals who opposed the death penalty were more likely to be Afri-

can American and born outside the United States and that those who supported capital punishment tended to be politically conservative and native southerners.<sup>4</sup>

The following section explores the possibility of whether the association between belonging to Christian fundamentalist denomination and support for capital punishment differs across race and region. We first discuss whether the association between Christian fundamentalism and support for the death penalty varies across race; subsequently, we explore whether the association between Christian fundamentalism and capital punishment varies across regions.

Of the 1,445 respondents, 198 (13.7 percent) were African Americans. African Americans were significantly more likely to belong to a Christian fundamentalist denomination. Of the African Americans, 61.6 percent belonged to a Christian fundamentalist denomination in comparison to 24.8 percent for Whites and others. Research indicates that the positive effect of conservative religious beliefs and support for the death penalty may be restricted to Whites (Grasmick and McGill 1994). Research additionally shows that African Americans are significantly less likely to support capital punishment than are Whites (Barkan and Cohn 1994; Borg 1997; Britt 1998; Grasmick and McGill 1994; Soss et al. 2003; Unnever and Cullen 2004).

We investigated whether the effect of belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination on support for the death penalty was significant among Whites but insignificant among African Americans. We divided our sample into two groups, African Americans and others ( $n = 1,247$ ) and reproduced the analysis presented in Table 5 for each group. The effect of belonging to a fundamentalist denomination on support for capital punishment was insignificant regardless of which group we analyzed. We also included the interaction term Christian Fundamentalist  $\times$  African American in the full-regression equation presented in Table 5 and it was insignificant.

We also separately tested whether the influence of belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination on support for the death penalty varied across whether the respondent was a native southerner. We included the interaction term Christian Fundamentalist  $\times$  Native Southerner in the full binary logistic regression equation presented in Table 5 and it was significant ( $p = .051$ ). We generated a set of cross-tabulations to investigate why the influence of belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination on support for capital punishment significantly varied across whether the respondent was a native southerner. These cross-tabulations showed that members of Christian fundamentalist denominations who were not native southerners were *less* likely to support the death penalty, 66 percent, than nonnative southerners of other denominations, 75 percent (Chi-square = 6.03,  $p = .01$ ).

Another cross-tabulation showed that fundamentalists who were native southerners were not significantly more likely to support capital punishment, 80 percent, than native southerners who were not fundamentalists, 76 percent (Chi-square = 1.12,  $p = .28$ ). The cross-tabulations also showed that native southern fundamentalists were more likely to support capital punishment, 80 percent, than fundamentalists who resided in other regions, 66 percent. However, fundamentalists who were native southerners were not significantly more likely to support the death penalty, 80 percent, than native southerners of other denominations 76 percent. Thus, these data suggest that it is not belonging to a fundamentalist denomination that escalates support for capital punishment but rather being raised in the South. In fact, fundamentalists who were nonnative southerners were significantly less likely to support the death penalty than nonnative southerners belonging to other denominations.

Finally, we present an analysis that places the Christian fundamentalists' support for capital punishment in a relative context. We investigated the degree to which belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination predicted four politically salient issues: capital punishment, abortion, prayer in school, and support for the civil liberties of gays and lesbians. Model 1 of Table 6 shows the binary logistic regression results for capital punishment, Model 2 of Table 6 presents the binary logistic regression results for disapproval of abortion, Model 3 of Table 6 shows the binary logistic regression results for school prayer, and Model 4 presents the ordinal regression results for the civil liberties of gays and lesbians.

The results from Table 6 reproduce the results presented earlier that indicated a null relationship between support for capital punishment and belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination. However, Model 2 of Table 6 shows that members of Christian fundamentalist denominations were significantly more likely than members of other denominations to disapprove of abortions if the woman wants it for any reason. The predicted odds of a member of a Christian fundamentalist denomination disapproving of abortion were nearly two and a half times larger than the predicted odds of non-fundamentalists. Model 3 of Table 6 indicates that members of Christian fundamentalist denominations were significantly more likely than members of other denominations to disagree with the U.S. Supreme Court ruling regarding school prayer. Model 4 of Table 6 shows that members of Christian fundamentalist denominations were significantly more likely to oppose the civil liberties of gays and lesbians. Note that the results show that Christian fundamentalists were opposed to abortion, the civil liberties of gays and lesbians, and school prayer; however, capital punishment was not a salient issue.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 6**  
**Regression Analyses of the Relationship between Support for Capital Punishment, Support for Abortion, Support for School Prayer, Support for the Civil Liberties of Gays and Lesbians, and Fundamentalist Denomination Affiliation**

Variable	Model 1 Support for Capital Punishment (n = 1,445)	Model 2 Support for Abortion (n = 790)	Model 3 Support for School Prayer (n = 806)	Model 4 Support for the Civil Liberties of Gays and Lesbians (n = 780)
Age	1.00 (.99-1.01)	.99 (.99-1.00)	1.02*** (1.01-1.03)	.02*** (.00)
African American	.24*** (.17-.35)	.72 (.44-1.17)	1.58 (.96-2.59)	.28 (.22)
Gender (male = 1)	1.35* (1.04-1.73)	1.05 (.77-1.44)	.80 (.59-1.08)	.18 (.15)
Born outside of United States	.61** (.41-.90)	2.09* (1.11-3.92)	1.18 (.67-2.09)	.95*** (.28)
Education	.96 (.92-1.01)	.89*** (.83-.94)	.90*** (.85-.95)	-.17*** (.02)
Social class	1.04 (.85-1.27)	.77 (.59-1.00)	.83 (.64-1.07)	.04 (.12)
Political conservative	1.18*** (1.07-1.29)	1.52*** (1.35-1.71)	1.41*** (1.25-1.58)	.20*** (.05)
Native southerner	1.44** (1.07-1.96)	1.19 (.83-1.72)	1.67** (1.17-2.39)	.47** (.17)
Fundamentalist	1.02 (.75-1.38)	2.67*** (1.80-3.97)	1.46* (1.02-2.10)	.79*** (.17)
Model chi-square	107.01***	126.03***	127.37***	148.50***
Correctly classified	66.672.2	72.0		
Nagelkerke $R^2$	.25			

Note: Models 1 through 3 are binary logistic regression equations with odds ratios and confidence limits in parentheses. Model 4 is an ordinal regression equation with estimates and standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

Religious beliefs are a potentially salient force in shaping political issues and predicting the public's sentiments concerning crime control policies. Perhaps the most contentious crime control policy is capital punishment. The importance of this topic takes on a global significance, because the United States is one of the few countries in the world that carries out the death penalty. Within the United States, the debate that encompasses capital punishment ignites deeply held convictions that individuals tend to morally justify. Quite often, individuals quote biblical scriptures justifying their position on capital punishment (Murphy 2003). Accordingly, an understanding of why the death penalty has such a wide base of support involves illuminating the linkages between religious beliefs and support for capital punishment for convicted murderers.

Scholars have taken on the task of discovering the pathways between religious beliefs and support for capital punishment. This effort has focused on establishing the relationship between conservative religious beliefs and support for the death penalty. Particularly since the 1980s, there is one religious group that has become prominently identified with having conservative religious beliefs: members of Christian fundamentalist denominations. Researchers have reasoned that because members of Christian fundamentalist denominations have more conservative religious beliefs than members of more moderate or liberal denominations, they should be more likely to support capital punishment—just as they are more likely to embrace a number of politically conservative policy positions.

This reasoning has been so widely accepted that researchers universally include measures of Christian fundamentalism in their models of public support for capital punishment (see, e.g., Baumer et al. 2003). Although, this assumption has substantial face validity, the research based on this supposition has not generated a convincing body of supporting evidence; indeed, the extant research is divided. A number of widely cited studies implicate that Christian fundamentalists are more likely to support the death penalty (Borg 1998; Grasmick, Bursik, et al. 1993; Grasmick, Cochran, et al. 1993; Grasmick and McGill 1994), but more recent research has concluded that Christian fundamentalists are not more likely to support capital punishment than members of other denominations (Applegate et al. 2000; Baumer et al. 2003; Soss et al. 2003; Unnever et al. 2005).

In this current project, we found convincing evidence that members of Christian fundamentalist denominations were more religiously conservative than members of other religious denominations. Our results showed that Christian fundamentalists were more likely to interpret the Bible literally and

were more likely to have a harsh image of God. However, we found that Christian fundamentalists were not more likely to support capital punishment than members of more moderate or liberal denominations.

It is our position that religious beliefs can justify support and opposition to capital punishment. We found that members of Christian fundamentalist denominations were more likely to have a harsher image of God than members of more moderate denominations, and that individuals who had a harsher image of God were more likely to support capital punishment. However, we also found that Christian fundamentalists were more forgiving and compassionate than members of other, more moderate denominations and that individuals who more strongly believed in compassion were less likely to support the death penalty. Thus, we discovered that members of Christian-fundamentalist denominations had conflicting religious beliefs. These beliefs justified supporting the death penalty but also diminished their level of support.

We also found an additional reason why support for capital punishment was not greater among Christian fundamentalists than members of other denominations. Our results showed that Christian fundamentalists were significantly more likely to rigorously practice their religion than members of other denominations. However, it could be argued that support for the death penalty should be *more* pronounced among Christian fundamentalists who rigorously practice their religion: more rigorous practice should intensify their conservative religious beliefs, thus increasing their level of support for the death penalty. Our results do not support this argument.

Our analyses indicate that rather than inculcating conservative religious beliefs, an intense religious practice tends to instill religious and secular beliefs that moderate an individual's support for the death penalty. More specifically, we found that forgiveness and compassion were positively associated with religious salience, which, in turn negatively predicted support for capital punishment. Thus, an additional reason why Christian fundamentalists were not more likely to support the death penalty than members of more moderate denominations was because their intense religious practice infused them with beliefs that lessened their overall level of support.<sup>6</sup>

We are not unmindful that public support for capital punishment is high; in most years, more than 70 percent of Americans support the death penalty. It is possible that the relative lack of variation in capital punishment attitudes reduced the social space in which religion might operate to differentiate those who support or do not support capital punishment.<sup>7</sup> Two considerations remain, however. First, Christian fundamentalism often is portrayed as a force that binds its adherents to especially right-wing social positions. Indeed, we found that Christian fundamentalists were more likely to support

prayer in school and to oppose abortion and the civil liberties of gays and lesbians. But in regards to the death penalty, we found that their support did not hinge on their religious allegiance. Second, more subtly, fundamentalism exerts complex influences whose effects should not be easily stereotyped.

Our finding that Christian fundamentalists are a diverse group who should not be easily stereotyped parallels the conclusions drawn from the research on Christian fundamentalism and punitive parenting beliefs. Initially, research reported that Christian fundamentalists were more likely than parents of other denominations to value child obedience and approve of corporal punishment. In addition, researchers argued that these punitive parenting beliefs were a product of the theological and cultural conservatism associated with Christian fundamentalism (Ellison and Sherkat 1993a, 1993b). However, recent analyses question the portrait painted by past researchers. Wilcox (1998) found that although it is true that Christian fundamentalists were more likely to rely on corporal punishment, it would be wrong to characterize their parenting style as punitive or authoritarian. Rather, Wilcox (1998:807) reports that Christian fundamentalists harness theological psychological values "that dictate a warm, expressive style of parenting for most parent-child interaction." The findings by Bartkowski and Wilcox (2000) further challenge the image of Christian fundamentalist parents as being punitive. They found that Christian fundamentalists were significantly less likely to report yelling at their preschoolers and school-age children than their nonconservative counterparts. These findings, tangentially related to our own, show a complexity among Christian fundamentalists that is inaccurately portrayed by characterizations that they are a monolithic group with a punitive orientation.

We end by making some methodological observations. Grasmick and his colleagues have presented the strongest case for arguing that Christian fundamentalists are more likely to support the death penalty than members of other more theologically liberal traditions (Grasmick, Bursik, et al. 1993; Grasmick, Cochran, et al. 1993; Grasmick and McGill 1994). Clearly, our analysis questions such a conclusion. The differences in our samples could be a possible reason why our results differ from those generated by Grasmick and his colleagues. We used the 1998 GSS, which is a national probability sample, whereas Grasmick's single-city survey collected data from residents of Oklahoma City. Grasmick found that Christian fundamentalists in Oklahoma City were more supportive of capital punishment than Oklahoma City residents of other denominations.

Unnever et al. (2005) argue that there may be contextual effects that affect the likelihood of finding a relationship between Christian fundamentalism and public opinion about the death penalty. Soss et al. (2003) demonstrate an



example of a contextual effect when they show that White opinion about capital punishment depends on African American residential proximity. They report that as the African American percentage of county residents increases, so also does the impact of racial animus on White support for the death penalty (Soss et al. 2003). Therefore, Unnever et al. (2005) suggest that the discrepancies found in the literature examining the association between Christian fundamentalism and support for the death penalty could arise, in part, from whether the study analyzed a nationally representative sample or was conducted in areas with high concentrations of Christian fundamentalists, such as in Oklahoma City.

Regnerus (2003) and Baier and Wright (2001) argue that individuals' behavior may be influenced if they are living in areas that are relatively homogenous in religious beliefs. Thus, Unnever et al. (2005) suggest that it is possible that fundamentalists residing in Oklahoma City may have constructed "moral communities" that have resulted in individual fundamentalists more stridently supporting the death penalty than if they were living in areas that were more religiously diverse. They further suggest that this could explain why the studies conducted by Grasmick (Grasmick, Bursik, et al. 1993; Grasmick, Cochran, et al. 1993; Grasmick and McGill 1994) found significant relationships between fundamentalism and support for the death penalty in Oklahoma City, whereas others using national probability samples have failed to find a relationship.

We also note that studies using national probability samples have generated inconsistent findings. For example, studies using the GSS—such as Stack (2003)—report that belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination positively predicts greater support for the death penalty, whereas the current project and others report a null relationship (e.g., Baumer et al. 2003; Soss et al. 2003). It is our position that these discrepancies result from the inherent weakness of the relationship between Christian fundamentalism and support for the death penalty (e.g., review Table 1). Moreover, it is instructive that even when such studies show a direct relationship, the magnitude of the fundamentalism coefficient and its statistical significance are marginal. In short, it is reasonable to conclude that because of conflicted religious beliefs, Christian fundamentalism is neither a robust nor consistent predictor of greater support for the death penalty; it explains an insignificant amount of the variance in public opinion about capital punishment.

In sum, our results clearly indicate that Christian fundamentalists were not more likely to support the death penalty for convicted murderers than members of more moderate and liberal denominations. We offer two reasons for this finding. First, their religious beliefs generated a conflicted level of ambiguity, in effect weakening their overall level of support for the death

penalty. As noted above, Christian fundamentalists hold beliefs that positively predict support for capital punishment (e.g., a harsh image of God) but also express beliefs that negatively predict support for the death penalty (e.g., compassion). Second, our data show that Christian fundamentalists were more likely than nonfundamentalists to have a rigorous religious practice. Our results further indicate having a rigorous religious practice was positively related to being more compassionate and forgiving. Thus, the more Christian fundamentalists rigorously practiced their religion, the more they were infused with compassionate and forgiving beliefs, which in turn further moderated their overall level of support for the death penalty.

Our analysis supports recent media accounts that question the portrayal of Christian fundamentalists as staunch conservatives who oppose liberal issues with one voice. Our analysis suggests that Christian fundamentalists have varied secular opinions that are infused with diverse theological beliefs (Gallagher 2004). These theological beliefs may allow Christian fundamentalists to fervently support conservative social policies such as abortion but at the same time have mainstream attitudes toward the death penalty. They also may allow Christian fundamentalists to passionately oppose gay rights but be infused with compassion and forgiveness for those who have “failed.” Notably, Feldman and Steenbergen (2001) argue that humanitarian prosocial beliefs are and always have been part of the American landscape. Indeed, they contend that the marriage between capitalism and humanitarianism is perhaps as old as this country. Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that Christian fundamentalists can be socially conservative on some issues such as abortion but at the same time support humanistic-oriented social programs.

Recent developments within the Christian fundamentalist movement support our last conclusion. In 2004, the National Association of Evangelicals unanimously adopted an historic document on public engagement that calls “evangelicals to a biblically balanced concern that reflects the full range of God’s concerns for the well-being of marriage, the family, the sanctity of human life, justice for the poor, care for creation, peace, freedom and racial justice” (National Association of Evangelicals 2004). It is instructive that this document, while endorsing pro-life and family issues, omits the issue of the death penalty. Thus, we suggest that politicians may find it easier to mobilize Christian fundamentalists to oppose abortion and gay marriages than to galvanize their support for capital punishment.

Finally, our results do not rule out the possibility that there may be factions within Christian fundamentalism that might be more or less supportive of the death penalty. Although we found no evidence that White and African American Christian fundamentalists significantly differed in their support for capital punishment, research indicates that the interplay between religion

and politics may vary across race (Calhoun-Brown 1998). A recent poll by the Pew organization documents that although African American and White evangelical Christians are remarkably similar in their views about the role of religion in politics (e.g., both oppose abortion and gay marriages), they come to sharply different partisan conclusions (e.g., African American evangelical Christians leaned strongly against President Bush and Republicans, whereas White evangelicals leaned strongly toward President Bush and the Republican party; Pew Forum on Religion and Life 2003b). Thus, future research may want to further explore whether African American Christian fundamentalists are less supportive of the death penalty than White Christian fundamentalists. In addition, future research may wish to explore whether native southerners who are Christian fundamentalists are more likely to support the death penalty than other Christian fundamentalists. Moreover, researchers may want to investigate whether evangelists are less supportive of capital punishment than other Christian fundamentalists (Calhoun-Brown 1998). However, we argue that if researchers factionalize “Christian fundamentalism” into assemblies that have divergent attitudes, they are implicitly acknowledging that it is an ineffectual concept for understanding why the United States is one of the few countries in the world that carries out the death penalty.

## Notes

1. A total of 8 percent of the respondents, when asked, “Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?” reported that they “don’t know.”

2. It could be argued that our inability to find a significant relationship between fundamentalism and support for the death penalty resulted from our use of Smith’s (1990) classification of denominations. It also could be argued that if we had used a more rigorous measure of fundamentalism, we would have found that they were more likely to support the death penalty. It could be further argued that a more rigorous measure of fundamentalism should include whether the respondent belonged to a fundamentalist denomination and whether they were biblical literalists. We tested for this possibility by constructing an interaction term  $\text{Fundamentalist} \times \text{Literal}$  and included it in the full binary logistic regression equation presented in Table 5. Its effect on support for the death penalty was insignificant.

3. We investigated whether the influence of belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination on support for capital punishment varied across levels of religious salience. We included the interaction term  $\text{Christian Fundamentalist} \times \text{Salience}$  in the full binary logistic regression equation presented in Table 5 and it was insignificant.

4. We also substituted family income (summary scale ranging from 1 to 23, where the minimum category denotes an income of “under \$1K” and the maximum category denotes “\$110K or over”) in the binary logistic regression equation presented in Table 5 for the self-reported variable, Social Class. The results with family income in the equation were substantively identical to those reported in Table 5.

5. These results must be seen as suggestive. Although we take into account major demographic variables, it is possible that controls for other factors might diminish the impact of fundamentalism on these three other dependent variables. It is beyond the scope of the current study, however, to review diverse sets of literature and to expand the analysis and to incorporate a range of alternative independent variables. Even so, the results provide a tentative basis for proposing that the impact of fundamentalism on views toward capital punishment likely differs from its impact on sentiments toward other social or moral policy issues.

6. It could be argued that compassionate and forgiving individuals are more likely to rigorously practice their religion rather than a rigorous religious practice infuses individuals with more forgiving and compassionate beliefs. We cannot disentangle the causal ordering between a rigorous religious practice and forgiving and compassionate beliefs. The data we analyzed, the General Social Survey (GSS), are cross-sectional. Future researchers may wish to address this causal ordering question using longitudinal data.

7. It is instructive that previous studies have shown that even though the mean level of support for the death penalty is high (76 percent), belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination positively predicted support for the death penalty (Young 1992). Indeed, it is reasonable to argue that the overall mean level of support for the death penalty (grouping Christian fundamentalists with nonfundamentalists) is skewed to the right because the mean level of support among Christian fundamentalists is significantly higher. Thus, it is unlikely that our finding of a null relationship between belonging to a Christian fundamentalist denomination and support for capital punishment can be attributed to the mean level of support being high—73 percent of the respondents in our sample supported the death penalty. We cross-tabulated our data and found that 73 percent of Christian fundamentalists in comparison to 75 percent of nonfundamentalists supported the death penalty.

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**James D. Unnever** is a professor of sociology at Mississippi State University. His most recent research focuses on whether egalitarianism and racial resentment predict support for crime reduction policies, the racial divide in support for capital punishment, and the relationship between victimization and political beliefs.

**Francis T. Cullen** is Distinguished Research Professor of Criminal Justice and Sociology at the University of Cincinnati. His most recent works include *Combating Corporate Crime: Local Prosecutors at Work*, *Criminological Theory: Context and Consequences*, and *Criminological Theory: Past to Present—Essential Readings*.