

Forum



Forum space is reserved for comment written in the spirit of Elder B. H. Roberts' 1906 declaration. The "crying need" of Mormonism, he said, is

"For thoughtful disciples who will not be content with merely repeating some of its truths, but will develop its truths; and enlarge it by that development. Not half—not one-hundredth part—not a thousandth part of that which Joseph Smith revealed to the Church has yet been unfolded, either to the Church or to the world. The work of the expounder has scarcely begun."

(Improvement Era 9:712-13.)

Sunstone encourages your thoughtful comment on gospel topics.

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT AND BLOOD ATONEMENT

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Because of the recent trial and execution of Gary Gilmore, the question of capital punishment has regained a prominent position on the national agenda. Persuasive arguments both for capital punishment (it deters certain types of murder; society demands justice or retribution) and against (it doesn't act as a deterrent and may, in fact, act as a stimulus in certain cases; it brutalizes society) are presented with conviction and forcefulness. Yet, within the context of the present national debate, many members of the Church seem to remain sur-

prisingly aloof. Rather than personally confront the numerous moral and social dilemmas inextricably bound up in the question of capital punishment, they prefer to rely on the so-called doctrine of blood atonement as the basis of their position. Such a stance is—I believe—all too facile and, at the same time, fraught with certain dangers stemming in large part from the rather nebulous nature of the doctrine of blood atonement.

It is acknowledged that the practice of blood atonement was present in the days of Moses as well as certain other periods in the Old Testament. What is not so clear is the present status of the doctrine. Though my sources are admittedly limited here in the hinterlands of Mormondom, I have searched in vain for an official Church pronouncement on the doctrine of blood atonement, have found little in the way of scriptural references from the New Testament, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants or the Pearl of Great Price which shed light on the subject, and have discovered only a few writings by private individuals (albeit Church authorities) that seem to raise more questions than they answer.

Genesis 9:6 states that "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed." Though less explicit, reference is also made to the fate of murderers in 2 Nephi 9:35 and Alma 42:19—they "shall die." The New Testament and the other standard works, however, have very little to say on the subject. The most frequently quoted modern

scripture is that found in D. & C. 42:18-19: "And now, behold, I speak unto the Church. Thou shalt not kill; and he that kills shall not have forgiveness in this world, nor in the world to come. And again, I say, thou shalt not kill; but he that killeth shall die." When read within the context of the entire section, these verses seem to refer more to a spiritual than a physical death.

Broaching the subject of blood atonement in his book *Answers to Gospel Questions*, Joseph Fielding Smith quotes profusely from Charles W. Penrose's book on blood atonement which states that "this divine law for shedding the blood of a murderer has never been repealed. . . ." (*Blood Atonement*, pp. 25-26.)

Penrose then goes on to rebut the argument that the law concerning death to adulterers as well as murderers was superseded by Christ's ministry, using the example of the adulteress brought before Christ. He points out that the law should not be carried out but rather, "Let him that is without sin cast the first stone" and, after inquiring where the woman's accusers were, "Neither do I accuse thee."

Even if one accepts the current validity of blood atonement, the question arises as to the organs which are to judge and administer such a doctrine. Throughout much of the period covered by the Old Testament, secular and religious authority resided in the same body. Under such circumstances, one could be reasonably sure of just decisions through divine guidance. For the present day, however, D. & C. 42 states that murderers should be dealt with according to the laws of the land. But can we be as equally certain that justice will be executed when our social and

legal systems have so many endemic, human imperfections? In other words, the determination and imposition of sentences so terminal in nature are quite dangerous when undertaken without divine inspiration and which, at the same time, are divorced from the true purpose intended by God.

Implicit in this last sentence is an assumption that blood atonement is not only to act as a punishment for a grievous sin, but also to provide a murderer the means by which he may receive forgiveness at some future point in time; however, if such is the case, aren't the more intrinsic processes associated with repentance of much greater importance? In addition, doesn't atonement connote the voluntary giving rather than a mandatory taking away? And finally, in keeping with the Church position concerning obedience to the laws of the land, is it probable that a person completing all other requirements will be denied forgiveness because the doctrine of blood atonement was not fulfilled due to laws which prohibited the imposition of capital punishment (as is now the case in a number of European countries)?

In sum, I believe that one's position on capital punishment should not be founded on a doctrine about which so little is known or understood and whose present de facto—if not de jure—validity is open to question. Personal, introspective questioning of the moral and social implications of capital punishment, accompanied by careful evaluation of the evidence and arguments both for and against the death penalty, would seem to provide a much sounder foundation upon which to base one's own convictions on this important issue.