

Marijuana In Religion: To what extent is the use of medical marijuana ethical in different religions?

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3-4
The Ethical Use of Marijuana in Judaism.....	4-6
The Ethical Use of Marijuana in Islam.....	6-9
The Ethical Use of Marijuana in Christianity.....	9-12
Conclusion.....	13-14
Works Cited.....	15-16

Introduction

In July 2014, New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo signed the Compassionate Care Act. The Compassionate Care Act is a bill that oversaw the creation of a comprehensive medical marijuana program that would service the citizens of New York. As of April 25th 2017, this program has served over seventeen thousand patients medical marijuana. (New York State, 2017) New York State is not alone in this movement towards the legalization of marijuana. Not only medical marijuana, but recreational uses of marijuana has come to be a pressing issue, most recently in California, Nevada, Arizona, Massachusetts, and Maine, where medical marijuana laws decriminalizing the drug have begun making rounds around state offices. Twenty-eight states have medical marijuana laws, and four states along with Washington D.C have legalized the use of marijuana recreationally for adults (Blake) In fact, the issue of marijuana has gained favor not only with state legislators but with citizens as well. According to Gallup polls, in 2003 and 2005 the support for legalization of Marijuana was only 35%, the current approval rate among adults in the United States is 60% (Gallup). The current trend of the increasing support for legalization of marijuana in state legislations, whether it be in a medicinal or recreational matter. Furthermore, many are on the fence on marijuana and may be influenced by what they have heard in the news, read online, their experiences with in the past, or what they've heard from their friends. Another important influence on use of marijuana is religion, and many question what is to be done about marijuana in regards to religion? Although the current federal law states that marijuana is illegal, there is the question left off whether religions allow the ethical use of medical marijuana. It is important to note for the purposes of this

investigation that the use of medical marijuana would be assumed to be used in a legal sense, and not obtained through third party means. Although some religions, such as Rastafarian based ones, endorse the usage of marijuana, the religions being focused on in this paper will be Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Each of them have a varying take on the ethics of marijuana use, and although many of these religion's texts do not contain direct references to the use of the plant itself, through studies of the words of priests and other theologians of their faiths, enough evidence can be gathered to reasonably determine their stance on the ethics of medical marijuana usage and the scenarios regarding ones use of it.

The Ethical Use of Marijuana in Judaism

Judaism is a religion dating back over 3,000 years old (Mindell). Over the course of that time, the Judaic texts have stated several examples of the use of plants with different (historical) names than our modern plants, and in those examples, we see references towards hemp. Early references towards hemp or marijuana is found on ancient Jewish coins that depict possible opium plants being farmed suggest the cultivation, or at the very least, the knowledge of the existence of marijuana (Merlin, 313). Knowledge and the suggested cultivation of marijuana means that one can assume ancient Jewish people might have used it in many fashions, from resources to food to more leisurely reasons, hence one could reason ancient Judaic law allowed marijuana use in some capacity. If one were to assume that marijuana was allowed specifically legal medical usage, would the words of Judaic laws allow the ethical use of it? A deeper dive into ancient Jewish texts, however, gives us an answer to how Judaic laws would work in regard to marijuana. Some individuals, such as Yosef Glassman, a

geriatrician, claim that ancient text sources support the use of marijuana in both a recreational and medical sense (Davidson). "There is no question that the plant has a holy source, God himself, and is thus mentioned for several ritualistic purposes" claims Glassman, after he has been carefully studying Jewish text for years. Glassman claims that a reference towards "sweet cane" in several Jewish texts refers to the possible use of cannabis. However, Glassman's claims are not referenced nor supported by any other theologians on record. Furthermore, the ability to read the translations of ancient Hebrew text may be erroneous since we are, to this day, still discovering errors in the translations of ancient theological texts and scholars agree that the text we have now differed from the older versions. (Friedman, 2011) One claim that Glassman does make that is supported by text and a philosopher, is the use of marijuana that is noted in the Talmud. The Talmud is Jewish rabbinical literature that speaks on ceremonial and religious laws. Glassman specifically refers to Maimonides, a Jewish philosopher in the 1100's who commented on the Talmud nearly two centuries ago. Glassman's research claims "Maimonides was also an advocate of using cannabis oil for ailments such as colds and ear problems." as well as stating that cannabis was specifically mentioned, along with the implication with its use in herbal mixing. (Davidson). With Maimonides stance on the topic, it would seem Jewish texts support the use of marijuana in a medicinal sense. Other sources of the work of Maimonides show his purported support of medical marijuana as well. In Maimonides' commentary of Mishneh P'sachim, a part of the Talmud, a loose translation of Maimonides' words would claim that "God created drugs and compounds and gave us the intelligence necessary to discover their medicinal properties; we must use them in warding off illness and disease" which would

support Maimonides' earlier statement that cannabis can, in fact, be used to cure a number of ailments ("Procon"). Along with Maimonides' support of marijuana use to heal illness, an excerpt of text from Ben Sira claims "'God created medicines out of earth, and let no man of understanding reject them!" would then support the idea of using marijuana as a means of healing since it is quite literally a medicine out of earth ("Procon"). Thus, if marijuana has medicinal benefits, and were used as such, it would stand to reason that Jewish texts would support the use of marijuana (so long as it is seen it has medical benefits). Although the early rabbinical texts indicate the use of cannabis, that stance is not always mirrored by modern day rabbis. In 1973, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, a religious authoritative figure on Jewish law, claimed that cannabis was not allowed due to its harmful effects. Feinstein, along with two other leading rabbis claimed that marijuana is forbidden due to three reasons in religious texts. The first claim is that it interferes with Torah study and performance of the commandments. The second claim is that it leads into slavish sensuousness. The third claim was that it violates the claim in Deuteronomy that one may not bring anything harmful into one's house (Earleywine, 213). However, the rabbis claim that marijuana is dangerous bares the question of why are alcohol and cigarettes not banned? Both are considered dangerous by many societal standards, much more so than marijuana, yet neither are banned in any Jewish texts. If one were to follow the words of the three rabbis, many items such as alcohol, cigarettes, and even sugar would be banned. More modern day rabbis have, following the shift in opinion similar to the general population, have flipped their opinions on the herb. For example, in 2016 Chaim Kanievsky, a leading rabbi over many orthodox sects of Judaism, proclaimed that marijuana might be used for medicinal

purposes. (Vulliamy) With the opinion of the modern rabbi's squarely at its back, the argument that cannabis is allowed for medicinal uses seems to be the most certain choice. As Judaic texts and rabbis both support its usage, while they disallow the use of it in a recreational sense, citing that they should be used for "kosher" reasons such as medical uses. (Abrams)

The Ethical Use of Marijuana in Islam

Islam, just like Judaism, is an old religion, with layers of religious rules, codes, and decisions on everything from what you can eat, to what you can use as a drug. Islamic texts in general do not specify the use of marijuana. Although many consider marijuana to be categorized as "intoxicant" due to its side effects and its effect on balance and other motor functions. As such, the Prophet Muhammed establishes his stance in the book "*Hadith*" which is a collection of sayings from the prophet himself. In the book, he proclaims that "If much intoxicates, then even a little is haram" meaning forbidden. ("Hadith") Many Islamic scholars and theologians who then study the text and the works of Muhammed feel the same about the substance. Sayyid ali Khamenei, the current leader of Iran, answered questions about the use of marijuana in an open forum. Khamenei went on record stating that "It is haram [religiously forbidden] to use narcotics in any way because it results in considerable adverse effects in terms of personal health and social cost. By the same token, it is haram to deal in narcotics in any way, i.e., carrying, transporting, storing, selling, buying, etc" effectively saying that the use of marijuana is prohibited ("Why Islam Prohibits the Recreational Use of Marijuana."). Echoing the argument of Khamenei, Shaykh Muhammad bin Adam al-Kawthari, an Islamic scholar has also answered questions about marijuana. He states that marijuana

is an intoxicant, and as such “Drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, opium, etc are all unlawful (haram) due to the various harms connected with them.” effectively forbidding the use of it in general (Waqar). There are however, religious subsets of Islam that promote the use of marijuana. Sufism, a form of Islam that believes in many rituals and practices that typical Islamic believers do not, believes in the use of marijuana in a spiritual sense. Although more liberal than simply disallowing any smoking of marijuana, it still does not equate to the legalization of marijuana through religious texts. Sufis are religiously allowed to smoke marijuana (Ferrara). Although most Islamic scholars do not support marijuana in a general sense, when asked again about the use of marijuana specifically for medical purposes Khamenei stated that “There is no objection to it provided that the treatment and the eventual recovery are dependent on their use and it is prescribed by a trustworthy physician” showing that there is perhaps room for the use of marijuana, but as stated by Judaic scholars, it is only allowed in a medical sense (“Why Islam Prohibits the Recreational Use of Marijuana.”). This answer would seem to indicate that it would marijuana use would only be medically acceptable for specific scenarios, and if its use was appointed by a trusted physician. For example, if one were to have some very headaches that were cured by marijuana that a doctor simply provides without checking for other cures, it would be prohibited, yet if one were to suffer from glaucoma and a responsible doctor admitted you then suggested marijuana as a treatment, it may be permitted. One could argue that marijuana was used by Islam already in the past, thus it could be considered usable in current times. In the ninth century, the Arabic world used cannabis to heal a variety of problems. From syphilis to migraines, marijuana was used as a cure. Even the renown Islamic physician of the

time, Abu Bakr Mohammad Ibn Zakariya al-Razi used it (Booth). There is no doubt that the Islamic religion views marijuana as an intoxicant and thus bans it due to some of its negative side effects. Modern day Islam contrasts to Judaism as it seems that even as a medical tool, the use of marijuana is much more controversial and the stance of Islam is far more conservative than Judaism. This can be attribute to the modern day leaders of Islam being more conservative, and not as fast to push the medical benefits of marijuana. It seems then that with the reluctance to claim that marijuana is safe for use even in medicine, it would be considered acceptable only for usage in the most necessary of medical cases (where all alternative treatments fail). Religious Islamic figures such as Imam Mustapha El-Turk, leader of the Islamic Organization of North America is against marijuana as a medical treatment as a whole, claiming that it simply turns into a gateway for abuse and addiction. (Hijazi). Unlike Judaic religious law however, Islamic religious law prohibits many other items that are labeled as "intoxicants". That includes harmful items such as alcohol, and even pure vanilla extract or soy sauce, which make explain why Islam exhibits such rigidity towards the substance (Michalak et al, 523). Overall, it seems many Islamic figures either dislike, or do not trust marijuana regardless of its medical status. It's status as an "intoxicant" will likely hold it back from widespread Islamic adoption until the day comes where its medical properties are accepted by the Islamic community without stigma. Religious text does not seem to explicitly state marijuana itself should be disallowed for usage, especially in a marijuana case. Religious adherence would mean avoiding anything "haram", and what is forbidden is many times decided by Islamic religious leaders.

Thus, with the current stance of religious figures on marijuana, it seems to remain a primarily unethical choice for those practicing Islam.

The Ethical Use of Marijuana in Christianity

As one of most popular practiced religion in the United States and the world, the impact of whether medical marijuana is an important issue for the United States. (Ellwood et al) If one were a devoted and practicing Christian suffering from a medical issue, the possibility of the conflict between the ethics of choosing between religion and your pain would make a difficult decision to make. Like Islamic texts, Biblical scriptures, unlike Jewish scripture which references marijuana/hemp cultivation, do not make direct references to marijuana. Through biblical references to similar objects, we can gather evidence to how the Bible would approach medical marijuana. As marijuana is a plant on Earth, we can assume a reference to it in the Bible whenever certain passages revolve around "all the creations" on God's Earth. One specific example is the reference to plants in the book of Genesis. In the Bible, it is written that: "The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good" which pertains to marijuana as one could argue that marijuana is supported by God since it was created by him (The English Standard Version Bible, Genesis 1:12). This is a valid argument since God has himself brought forth the marijuana, and has seen that it is good (as all other creations are), there should be no reason to resist its usages. However, this would be a weak argument, as marijuana can be subjected to nefarious uses, and can lead to harmful effects, just as alcohol can lead to dangerous intoxication

and risk one's life. This is due to the common point in Christianity revolving around the idea of free will. With free will, humans are able to do whatever they please. As much as this means the ability for charity and helping others, we also see our fair share of individuals who can be described as "evil" even as God's creations. Thus, if one were to take an item that originally had no negative purpose such as a plant, and was then to use it as a tool for immoral reasons, it is due to free will and not the act of God creating that plant. One could then argue that marijuana is indeed good due the fact it was created by God, however, the way in which humans use it is how we determine whether it's ethical to use or not. This would then explain why many resist marijuana due to its stigma in popular culture and its sometimes over-dramatized side effects of laziness and empty-headedness. However, this idea that man can be free with its usage would still support the idea it can be used as beneficiary tool and have purpose as a medical substance. One must be wary however of indulging in too much, and the Bible warns of succumbing to the addictions of any substance. There is a quote that states "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything" explaining that no one item/thing should seize such mastery of your body (Corinthians 6:12). It can be argued that this applies to marijuana, as marijuana can certainly be helpful, but it can also be destructive and habit forming in roughly 10% of users medicinal and otherwise (Gumbiner). As such, it's still important to realize that as much as humans have free will to use marijuana in a negative way, they have just as much free will to be constructive and holistic with it. Through two separate Bible verses, one can establish the rules of usage of medicinal marijuana. Firstly, using alcohol as a reference for the Bible's stance on drug use, the Bible clearly supports the

notion that alcohol abuse is not tolerated, as it proclaims: "Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them!" (Isaiah 5:11). Thus, the rules are simple, although the drinking of alcohol is allowed (for example, in usage of church for the communion), woe is to he who overindulges. Secondly, the Bible also mentions Jesus' choice to break the Sabbath, when work is not allowed, in order to heal the sick (Matthew 12:1-16). Through examination of these biblical verses, we can establish that healing and helping is above all else, sometimes even the rules, as well as that one cannot over indulge themselves with any sinful activities, such as simply smoking weed for the side effects. This means than an activity such as medical marijuana, which is used to heal the sick without sinful indulgence in the drug, would be an ethical and acceptable procedure. Furthermore, the Bible allows other activities such as cigarettes, alcohol, sugar, coffee to be consumed. Theologians such as Ph.D Reverend Susan Thistlethwait have said that decriminalizing marijuana would be a "return to sense" for America. Thistlethwait also claims that the key concepts around America in regards to religious Christian laws are to keep citizens "pure", so as long as marijuana use was regulated under medicinal laws, it would be acceptable for usage. Similarly, the Mormon Church had supported only the study of medicinal marijuana, and keeps a cautious stance. Mormon Church official words were that they believe marijuana should "go through further research and the FDA process" before any decisions are made, which is a rationale stance. (Winslow) One may also argue that there has been no proof that marijuana is in any way worse than alcohol for the body, and as such there should be no reason it should not be used medically (as alcohol is to disinfect wounds). Clearly there is no basis established in biblical scripture

that if an item created by God is used for healing purposes while not causing overindulgence or sinful activities, it should be prohibited.

Although the biblical scripture can be interpreted both ways, as support for and against the use of medical marijuana, the actions of biblical scholars and priests is not so open to interpretation. From the actions of The Catholic Church, one would believe are not the largest supporters of the legalization of marijuana in any capacity. In fact, the Diocese of Boston spent \$850,000 dollars fighting the legalization of marijuana in Massachusetts when it came up during election period. (Blake, 2016) This may be because they strongly believed that the effect would increase recreational use instead of medicinal use. Alongside this Catholic fight against legalization, Pope Francis himself has come out in support against the legalization of marijuana for recreational uses (Bindrim, 2016). Although The Catholic Church has not made any statements regarding medical usages, though previous quotes from Church officials such as Pope Francis and the donations against the legalization of marijuana in Massachusetts, it would reason that the Church would claim medicinal marijuana as unethical. The Protestant Church, on the other hand, has shown support for medical marijuana as seen in several cases. The Presbyterian, Methodist, and Episcopal Churches have all shown support for medical marijuana legalization when according to Torie Bosch of Slate Magazine, many of their churches have made statements supporting the legalization of medicinal marijuana and dispelling the idea that marijuana do not directly lead one to live an evil lifestyle. (Bosch, 2007). Two separate churches with two separate stances on the matter would leave many conflicted when looking at the issue from an objective viewpoint. However, as the Catholic Church has never explicitly stated they do not

support the medical usage as they have with recreational usage, it may be easier to assume they wouldn't argue against it so much. With the information given by the different divisions of Christian churches, along with the Biblical stance, it would seem to reason that it would be an ethical choice to use medical marijuana for healing purposes for most Christian denominations. One exception would be for The Catholic Church, where its leaders and its money have not supported medicinal marijuana.

Conclusion

The answer to the ethics surrounding medical marijuana usage has never been crystal clear. Due to the fact that so few religious texts mention the topic, and even more so in a medicinal setting, it requires referencing different items and how the religion looks at them (such as their stances on alcohol and other drugs). However, because other drugs rarely display the medical benefits of marijuana, that too can be a challenge. Another factor that makes it a challenge are the sometimes conflicting reports of religious authoritative figures. Some religious figures may simply be a product of their times, places, or religious climate, and reflect the general public's feelings towards the subject, instead of deep reflection based on religious texts. We have seen examples of this, as the Catholic Church has gone from condemning gays to beginning accepting and being encouraging of one's sexuality. (Allen, 180) Each religion, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have answers that fall on the spectrum somewhere between fully ethical allowance, and complete forbiddance of usage. With Judaism and Christianity, one can say that this answer falls more towards the spectrum of ethical acceptance. Both religion's scriptures allow for the usage of items for medical purposes. It makes sense, as these two religions share very similar foundational beliefs. Christians biblical

examples help point to the fact that Jesus broke the rules to heal, and as such healing should take priority. If this is the case then using marijuana to heal those who are sick should take precedence. In the case of Judaism, the words of the scripture are not as supportive of the cause of ethical use of marijuana because there is so little text supporting it. Instead, the combined words of Judaic philosophers as well as rabbis who have openly supported the use of medicinal marijuana make it possible to reason that it too falls on the more ethical spectrum. Unlike the other two, Islam has a much harsher stance on the topic. Islam takes very serious what is put into the body, from the type of meats, to the type of food or drinks, it is a very serious offense to ingest something that is claimed "unclean." Unlike Judaism, however, religious leaders of Islam have explicitly considered marijuana forbidden for most uses, and are less open to the idea of its medical applications. Items that are especially considered haram and "intoxicant" fall onto the most avoided of objects. Due to this religious classification of marijuana, it is hard to see it be considered ethical to use in an Islamic sense. This harsher sentence of marijuana means that one would only use it if it were truly the last resort, as any other usage may be met with ridicule, shame, or even punishment. (Peters) In Islam, the use of medical marijuana would fall towards the end of the spectrum where it is not considered ethical, and its use is more taboo and forbidden than acceptable. Ultimately, nothing is ever white or black in the world of religion, and neither will it ever.

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