

Certainly some criminals are sociopaths who need to be separated from society, perhaps permanently. But some are people more like you and me whose lives have been complicated by mental illness, the misuse of alcohol or other drugs, or skin color. This does not mean that their acts should have no consequences, but it does mean that they are not as different from us as we like to think.

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Sarah Atwood

Elizabeth McOwat asks what is wrong with Americans that they still have the death penalty? Quite honestly, I cannot say what is wrong with us. I'm a sophomore in high school. My civics class has just finished reading the novel *The Chamber* by John Grisham. We have discussed all the pros and cons of the death penalty. Still, as an American I am not proud of the death penalty, and as a Christian, I am confused by it. I agree with a bumper sticker that says "When Jesus said 'Love your enemies,' I'm pretty sure he didn't mean kill them."

What purpose does the death penalty serve? It does rid us of dangerous criminals because they can't kill if they are dead. However, jails also rid us of dangerous criminals. They can't kill if they are locked up.

We claim to kill only when we are sure beyond a shadow of a doubt that this person is guilty. However, we are only human and therefore make mistakes. In North Carolina, a man named Darryl Hunt was falsely convicted of murder and spent 19 years in prison for it. Twenty years after conviction, we discovered the true murderer. What if we had killed Darryl Hunt? We can't give back a life after it has been taken. Even one mistake in one thousand is too many. Yes, we get rid of 999 murderers. But if one person dies innocently, the State becomes the murderer.

I believe the only real purpose the death penalty serves is for one of the most primal human instincts — revenge. Say a man steals, rapes and kills your daughter; you would want him dead, wouldn't you? Humans naturally want revenge. We say it solves the problem, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. I disagree. I say it creates more problems than it solves. One family is hurt if a man steals, rapes and kills their daughter. But another family is hurt as much when the State kills their son. He may be a bloodthirsty psychopath, but he is still their son. In *The Chamber*, Sam Cayhall is on death row for blowing up an office and killing two Jewish boys. His daughter, Lee, is embarrassed by him. But when Sam is put in the electric chair, Lee cries for her lost dad. In some ways she hated him, but she still cries for him, she is still hurt, she is still angry with the State for killing her father. Does revenge ever work the way we think it should? Do we ever feel better afterwards? Coupled with the instinct of revenge comes the emotion of guilt.

Is it right or moral to kill a person because he or she killed someone? The old saying holds true — two wrongs don’t make a right. Just because we have an excuse to kill him doesn’t mean we should. Just because we have an excuse, should we play God? Who gave us that right, who decided that judges and juries are demigods? How can we hold their blood on our hands with a clear conscience? I asked a friend who answered, “They gave up their rights when they committed a murder. Therefore, we aren’t

murdering them.” I was under the impression that the founding fathers of America said God gave us inalienable rights, rights that no one can take away. No matter how criminally insane, how bloodthirsty a person is, they are still a person. We cannot take away their humanity; therefore we cannot take away their life.

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The Authors Respond

We want to thank all the respondents for their thoughtful and insightful replies to our article. We wrote the paper in great anger shortly after Perrie had been executed in Raleigh, and we wanted to know, or understand, how such a thing could happen. We expected hostility in response to our views and the questioning anger that we felt (and still feel). This expectation of hostility was based on the experiences that Elizabeth has had from some American Moravians when she has visited another friend, Daniel, on death row in Arizona, and other prisoners.

However, your careful responses have heartened us greatly. We appreciate the way in which each person has looked at a different aspect of the debate around the death penalty.

Each contributor has emphasised a different and important aspect of this life and death issue — our search for moral answers, a reflection on our common humanity, our individual and societal rights, reaching closure through forgiveness rather than revenge, the fact that we, as humans, are made in the image of God, and our need to understand where God’s mercy may be found in the judicial process. Sr. Atwood and Sr. Carver address the aspects of society in the United States that have made the death penalty part of the culture. In a society built on individual rights, they show that some people feel that criminals have, by their actions, forfeited their own rights, but as Sr. Atwood argues, they have not lost their humanity. Sr. Carver resonates with our belief that there is