

## Willie Israel

I will begin by saying that I agree with the Sr. McOwat's views on capital punishment. The article powerfully conveys the author's deeply held conviction concerning the immorality of the death penalty. In writing her article, Sr. McOwat asks the question: "Why [do] so many of our Moravian brothers and sisters in the USA feel that the death penalty is both morally and ethically acceptable." In this response, I hope to provide my understanding of the mentality Sr. McOwat describes, react to the rationale behind this mentality and offer my own thoughts as to the legitimacy of the death penalty from a Christian perspective.

It is true that the death penalty question is one of many issues that have led to the polarization of the American political scene. My reading leads me to generalize three reasons for acceptance of the death penalty in this country. These are:

1. Deterrence. Needless to say, the executed criminal will be unable to repeat his or her crime. In addition, fear of the death penalty will make potential criminals think twice before committing a capital offense.

2. Purification of society. As a surgeon removes a tumor from the body of a cancer sufferer, the elimination of a violent offender makes for a healthier society.

3. Retribution. The family(ies) of the victims receive closure — "payback" for the hurt engendered by the crime.

Depending upon individual experience,

Christian rationale for support of capital punishment may be related to any or all of the above reasons, along with a certain interpretation of scripture. The Old Testament provides an example of ancient scriptural support for the death penalty. In Leviticus 24:17, we are told, "Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death" (NRSV). For the Jews, murder was a capital offense, along with adultery, incest, homosexuality, bestiality, profanity, and sorcery. (Leviticus 20).

In the New Testament, support for capital punishment centers around Romans 13:1-4; verse 4 reading, "for [*archon* — ruler or leader] is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer." (NRSV)

Deterrence: Taken at face value, the most persuasive argument in favor of capital punishment is the deterrent effect. Because senseless, violent crime is a growing source of fear in the United States, our communal anxiety compels us to seek a solution to the problem. Proponents of the death penalty offer compelling statistical evidence of its deterrent effect on crime. In an article entitled "The Deterrent Effect of Capital Punishment," Wesley Lowe presents the following statistics:

"In 1960, there were 56 executions in the USA and 9,140 murders. By 1964, when there were only 15 executions, the number of murders had risen to 9,250. In 1969, there were no executions and 14,590 murders, and 1975,

after six more years without executions, 20,510 murders occurred rising to 23,040 in 1980 after only two executions since 1976. In summary, between 1965 and 1980, the number of annual murders in the United States skyrocketed from 9,960 to 23,040, a 131 percent increase. The murder rate — homicides per 100,000 persons — doubled from 5.1 to 10.2. So the number of murders grew as the number of executions shrank.”<sup>1</sup>

I submit, however, that we must be careful in making moral decisions based on statistical evidence alone. While statistics are a tool that can help us understand trends, they are not the only factors to be considered in our search for truth. It is a fact that statistics can be used to “prove” nearly any point of view. The study mentioned above considers only two variables: the murder rate vs. rate of executions. Before making cause-effect assumptions, we should carefully scrutinize all societal and environmental influences that may have led to the documented increase or decrease of violent crime.

Purification: This rationale is based on the premise that humans live in a culture that has the inherent potential to free itself from the blemishes of crime and violence. If there is an element in that culture that mars the potential of perfection, that element must be eliminated — either through reformation or removal. If there is an assumption that a person’s crimes are so severe that reformation is impossible, then capital punishment is seen as a reasonable alternative to life imprisonment. This rationale fits most closely with the Levitical code that

prescribed the threat of death as a means of keeping God’s people holy.

This argument is, as I see it, flawed in several ways. First, humanity has proven time and again its inability to attain a sin-free existence. Second, in order to justify the death penalty, we must assume not only the absolute infallibility of the judicial system, but also the premise that the accused has no hope of redemption. To the latter, I would comment that if God was able to reform and use two murderers (Moses and King David) as leaders of God’s people, how can we presume that God’s redeeming power does not extend to those we condemn? Finally in an article entitled “The Economics of Capital Punishment,” Phil Porter gives evidence for the argument that lifetime imprisonment of a convict is economically more feasible than the death penalty.<sup>2</sup>

Retribution: The current psychological buzzword, “closure” is often used as a euphemism for vengeance. When a person, a family, or a society has been grievously wounded by the consequences of needless violence, the desire for revenge is a natural human reaction. However, as satisfying as it may feel to hit back — to repay violence with violence, this action cannot restore the loss or heal the hurt. Evil is not eradicated through human vengeance.

True “closure,” or the restoration of wholeness to a family or individual comes, not through acts of vengeance (which are God’s prerogative) but through forgiveness. I will illustrate this point using two situations involving acts of extreme violence.

In 1991, eleven-year-old Junny Rios-Martinez was kidnapped, raped and murdered. His killer, Mark Dean Schwab, was sentenced to death a year later. For sixteen years, Junny's family waited for "closure," and as the date for Schwab's execution approached, fifteen family members gathered to watch the ending of the killer's life. When Schwab's execution was delayed once again (November 15, 2007), the family was angry and frustrated.

There is a marked contrast between this family's reaction and that of the Amish community in Quarryville, Pennsylvania, in the aftermath of the October 2006 school shootings. Instead of seeking vengeance, that community relied on their love for each other, and their belief in Jesus' admonition to forgive. The Amish community, I believe, has already experienced healing and "closure" as they have supported one another through their grief.

As the Supreme Court continues to wrestle with the question of whether or not the death penalty is "cruel and unusual" punishment, the questions that Christians must consider are equally challenging. Are we willing to accept the possible execution of innocents, and the ongoing racial/social bias in sentencing persons convicted of capital crimes? Do we believe that God has the power to redeem even those who have committed unspeakable acts of violence? And finally, do we believe the Biblical claim that vengeance belongs to God? I believe that Christians must prayerfully consider all of these questions before supporting the government's right to take human life.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wesleylowe.com/cp.html#deter>, accessed 10-16-2007.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mindspring.com/~phporter/econ.html>, accessed 10-16-2007

## **Hermann Weinlick**

I thank our authors for their passionate words about the effect of the death penalty on those who are executed and also on the others involved — their families, doctors, prison employees — all of whom suffer from their contact with capital punishment. I would like to add a few comments on other aspects of this issue that seem important to me.

First, the death penalty has to do with what sort of God we as Christians worship. What does our God look like? How does our God relate to creatures like us? The Bible as a whole gives us contradictory pictures of God. God is pictured as destroying Sodom and Gomorrah and all of humanity except the family of Noah. That sort of God seems like the kind of God who approves of capital punishment, indeed metes it out. But the Old Testament God is also pictured as marking Cain to preserve him from revenge for killing his brother, as giving second chances to such guilty characters as David and