

Today a compassionate, deeply Christian prison teacher asked me how I reconcile the two elements in this Thinksheet's title.

I'll say now on paper what I said on phone, in hope he--& perhaps others--may find it helpful.

Dear _____,

1 Right you are that my FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT chapter on the death penalty does not help the project of reconciling execution & Scripture. That chapter is not titled "Arguments for capital punishment" but "A *libertarian* argument" Reminds me once again that no anthology of essays (Thinksheets) can deal adequately with any subject.

2 In getting both sides of the death-penalty debate all the way to victory, quoting the Bible gets us nowhere & everywhere, depending on, in each case, the stratum from which one chooses to mine proof-texts. What good, then, is it? It's the best book for **yo-yoing** from God to world back to God. As you know, throwing the yo-yo down is no problem: the problem is getting it back up when & where you want it! If in facing a personal/societal problem one begins somewhere else than God, one's thinking will not be biblical. No guarantee, of course, that one's thinking will be biblical just because one starts with God (throws the yo-yo from God): many a slip (to switch to another metaphor) 'twixt the cup & the lip.

3 Who, now, is this "God" from whom thinking, if it's to be biblical, must begin? The canonical God, the God of the whole (canon) of Scripture, the God who apprehends the believer as the believer struggles to comprehend God/world, to understand through devotion ("heart") & thought ("mind") & action, through all of which God struggles to reveal himself to us (&, in the incarnation, presents himself as one of us "for our sakes & our salvation"). And he does not violate our territory, our **will**: therefore, I am (as in said chapter-title) a libertarian (a word from the French Revolution, which tragically collapsed God's will & society's will into the will of the autonomous, sacred [theoretically inviolate!] individual; but if one avoids that double collapse, one is logically committed to help structure a society in which citizens are free to respond *as individuals* to God/others/culture/nature).

4 Our foundational American politic, the Puritan, sought to honor all those **three wills**--God's, society's, the individual's. My thinking is theocritical-analytic on this triangle whose apex (God) is above the earth & whose other angles (society & the individual) are on the earth.

5 Those whose consciousness is, for any reason, **disordered** cannot, with their full human powers, will, exercise volition: that fact commits me to "mental health." So with society: a **disordered**, chaotic society cannot fully prohumanly exercise its will under God & "with liberty & justice for all": that commits me to social order (as eg the Ten Commandments, which honor the triangle; & Ro.13 [which implicitly accepts the death penalty as essential to social order]). And if society & individual have a **disordered** relation to earth our mother & provider, such actions must be taken as will meet & satisfy the goal of sustainability (humanity/nature homeostasis)....This third disorder is now increasing, exponentially in both pollution & depletion. The Bible is a rich resource here for the theology of ecology. The divine order, for which we pray in the Lord's Prayer, supervenes over the three disorders for judgment & redemption. If human will, societal & individual, is to discover & obey the divine will, individual decisions & sociopolitical programs must be libertarian (freedom-willing) in intention.

6 Moving from the triangle to three concentric circles, we can see more clearly the factor of **context**. Society is the middle circle whether the individual or God is put in the center or outer circle: the model-indeterminacy of God/individual makes this diagram dynamic. If God drops out, as in our secular society's God-amnesia, the circles collapse into a line of tension between individual/society. You & I, as Christians, refuse to accept that collapse vis-a-vis the death penalty or any other

issue. (For an incident of dropping God, see #2668, "Whence opposition to capital punishment?": CAPE COD TIMES simply dropped all my biblical references!)

7 "Because he was noninstitutional and anticoercive, **Jesus** is easy to make a pacifist of; it's the easiest way to modernize him falsely....this inflammatory man, who was executed as a radical disturber of the peace, cannot honorably be recruited for the cause of pacifism."* Or any other social-order cause, such as pro/con capital punishment. He was an extreme, almost anarchic, contrarian-libertarian, so responsible to God as to seem irresponsible to "man" (society & the individual)....*FLOW.112. To follow him is (among other things) to make difficult the evasion of God's claim on one's attention/life/resources/relationships/witness. That claim entails repentance/faith/prayer/praise: communion with God. The quadruple love (of God/self/neighbor/enemy). Situational mindfulness (in contrast to ideologs, who work themselves up into a mindless frame of mind).

8 The paradox here is that while God's claim relativizes all human claims, it absolutizes human will, which is absolutely-potentially free to accept/reject God's claim. ("Potentially": actually, many factors-forces, including "original sin," fight against freedom of the will; & a humane jurisprudence will weigh these factors-forces while trying to fulfil the chief ends of legal process, which are fairness & the maintenance-restoration of social order).

9 Absolute opposition to the death penalty absolutizes a human claim, the claim to life, & is therefore essentially atheist or at least deist: it rejects, wittingly or no, the fact that God's claim relativizes all human claims. Anthropocentrism (the individual as claimant) replaces theocentrism (God as claimant). The fact that liberal churches, councils of churches, & most secular-democratic nations oppose capital punishment--as you rightly said--proves the case I'm making here, & confirms me in my opposition to ideological opposition to the death penalty.

10 All the weapons can be used on both sides of this war: "the dignity of man [sic]" (first pushed by Pico in the Renaissance), human rights/responsibilities, fairness/justice, "the absolute value of human life," the "sacredness" of [human] life, honor, love, freedom/liberty, order ("the public tranquility"). Each side deploys these word-weapons on what is presumptively (often self-righteously) the high ground. Progress in dialog will depend on surrendering the slogans, cooling the rhetoric, learning to listen to the other side. Almost as hard to do on capital punishment as on abortion!....I'll finish out this one-sheet Thinksheet with suggestions:

(1) Neither **compassion** for the condemned nor concern for social **cohesion** should be ideologized, one against the other (as in individualism/collectivism). Opposition to the death penalty is a dogma weighing against social order, which is now afflicted with recidivism & the galloping need to increase prison space & the police.... (2) The revolving door (recidivism) shows less respect for human life (social health, freedom from civil fear) than does capital punishment....(3) God is holy, honor & freedom are sacred, nature (including humanity) is neither (being, in biblical religion, desacralized)....(4) Corrigibility is evangelically possible (the condemned's will becoming repentant--thus the Quakers' prisons as "penitentiaries," the predecessors of today's "correctional institutions") but decreasingly practicable: the anomie, conscience-less sector of our populace being on a steep increase....(5) Biolatry (or vitalism; the worship of bio-life) is blasphemy. Call it LAD, life-addiction disorder. It appears in anticontraception (as denying life to spermata/ova), antiabortion (as denying life to zygotes/fetuses/embryos), antiexposition (as denying life to seriously defective neonates), antiexecution, antisuicide, anti-euthanasia, anti-war (ie, absolute pacifism)....(6) "The individual" is an abstraction; the reality is "the person-in-community." The Enlightenment, & most current arguments against the death penalty, ground themselves in the abstraction....(7) "Murder" is a legal, not a moral, category. A recent book, THE TRAGEDY OF AMERICAN COMPASSION, details the sentimental expansion of legal into moral categories. Even contraception is the "murder" of spermata/ova!....(8) Denial of death is a factor in anti-capital-punishment....(9) Overvaluing human beings today undervalues human beings tomorrow (eg, national debt passed on to future generations). True in health care & in the punishment of condemneds....(11) Lifers should have their decisional dignity honored: they should be given the option of death with dignity (as Socrates).