



*Against The Death Penalty: Christian and Secular Arguments Against Capital Punishment*, Gardner C. Hanks, Herald Press, 1997; 208 pages.

by Wayne Northey

Eleven years after the Canadian Parliament decisively voted against the return of the death penalty, the Reform Party of Canada has decided to make this issue a major thrust in 1998. The book's appearance therefore, though directed towards and informed by current American reality, is timely for Canadians too. The cold-blooded execution of Karla Faye Tucker, born-again Christian, is further pointer to the book's timeliness.

The title gives away its thrust. Of interest to Christian readers is, Hanks' own conversion is traceable to the leadership taken by Christians in their opposition to capital punishment. He was impressed by their powerful witness to "an executed Lord". Six months after their action in which he participated opposing the execution of John Spenklink (May, 1979 in Florida), "I became a Christian", the author tells us. Further, "My friendships with death row inmates and with family members of other men on death row have convinced me more than ever that the death penalty is opposed to everything the God I love and worship stands for (p. 15)." His book is evangelistic in witness to his love for that executed Lord besides being apologetic against the death penalty.

Hanks explains that he struggled in writing the book concerning who is his audience. He decided to include much argumentation that secular people could readily appreciate, but also to be true to his own story, and begin and end with Christian reasons for opposing the death penalty. In the Preface the author outlines the structure of the book: two beginning chapters devoted to biblical considerations; two on the history of opposition to such punishment; two chapters on deterrence theories; a chapter on repeat offenders and the death penalty; the next on the needs of victims; five chapters concerning myriad injustices around use of capital punishment; a chapter on wrongful convictions and the execution of innocents; two chapters on the staggering fiscal and social costs of capital punishment; a penultimate chapter on seeing the death penalty as "cruel and unusual punishment"; and a revisiting finally of the spiritual and moral considerations in opposition to such a heinous measure, what we learn in the Foreword writer Will Campbell once labelled "just plain tacky". There are also five helpful "Appendixes", two of which are US-oriented.

The author at the outset uses compelling arguments to advance the proposition: "Since killing and revenge are incompatible with love, it should be obvious that capital punishment cannot be part of the reign of God inaugurated through Jesus Christ (p. 40)." Hanks himself was drawn to Christ because of God's love. He sees in Christ an image of God shorn of all vestiges of violence, especially the ultimate violence of state sanctioned murder. He therefore interprets Romans 13 differently from dominant views (since the era of Constantine) of the state and capital punishment. Likewise, he disallows Genesis 9 as a timeless rationale for the death penalty, and reads the Old Testament as pointer to the New Testament opposition to capital punishment. He quotes I John 2:2 as a definitive NO to the need for any further atoning deaths: "[Christ] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."

As Restorative Justice advocate Howard Zehr states in the Foreword, "The book is exactly what the subtitle says.... One by one, Hanks addresses the issues, steering through them without becoming lost - no mean feat with a subject as complex and emotional as this one (p. 12)."

I am surprised that there is no reference to the finest study I know of on Genesis 9 with relation to capital punishment, published in *The Acts of Synod 1981*, "Report 31: CAPITAL PUNISHMENT STUDY COMMITTEE" (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, pp. 72-73, 448-91.), by a group of Christian Reformed scholars. I have twice used their material in a public forum on the issue. Baldly and overwhelmingly they demonstrate that Genesis 9 *cannot* be used as a timeless basis for state killings (a point conceded once exegetical evidence was adduced in both my dialogue experiences). I was also surprised that no writings by John Howard Yoder were used, recently deceased Mennonite biblical scholar, in particular his contribution to *The Death Penalty Debate* (H. Wayne House and John Howard Yoder, Dallas: Word, 1991). Finally, I could have hoped for a development of the theme of scapegoating with reference to capital punishment. The work of René Girard, interpreted and expanded theologically in James Alison's books (and those of many others), *Knowing Jesus* and *Raising Abel*, would have contributed significantly to the theological presentation. Their massive enterprise argues, "The perception that God is love has a specific content which is absolutely incompatible with any perception of God as involved in violence, separation, anger, or exclusion (James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination*, New York: Crossroad Publishers Company, 1996, p. 48)." "[I]n truth, and without any remorse or sadomasochism, Jesus loved his slayers. (*Raising Abel*, p. 188, see Luke 23:34)", is the amazing Gospel reversal of the death penalty and all violent ways! Nonetheless, Hanks has been quite thorough in drawing on secular and biblical sources.

This book will help convince the open but undecided, and bolster the opposition to the death penalty of the "already converted". It is likely to give pause at least to the thoughtful retentionist. But for the "Pharisee" in the church ranks, Jesus' words in Matt. 23:23 (KJV) will be used in ringing denunciation of all Christians "against the death penalty" (as once used in an angry diatribe against me and my "despicable ilk" during a secular public forum): "ye... have omitted the weightier matters of the law", he thundered at me, "judgment!!!" And to my verbal executioner that night, "judgment" meant capital punishment. That such an inversion of the thrust of that passage (see Micah 6:8 and the rest of that verse and chapter for its background and context) could have been used in defence of capital punishment is sure proof of the enormous capacity of, and temptation towards, *wrongly* "dividing the word of truth (II Tim 2:15)", we all share.

I warmly recommend this book with the warning: *Lector caveat* -let the reader beware!