



Quotes on the Death Penalty

“The movement to abolish the death penalty needs the religious community because the heart of religion is about compassion, human rights, and the indivisible dignity of each human person made in the image of God.”

--Sister Helen Prejean

“The abolition of the death penalty is making us a civilized society. It shows we actually do mean business when we say we have reverence for life.”

--Archbishop Desmond Tutu

“From this day forward, I no longer shall tinker with the machinery of death. ... I fell morally and intellectually obligated simply to concede that the death penalty experiment has failed.”

--U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun

“Unless we live with nonviolence and reverence for all living beings in our hearts, all our humaneness and acts of goodness, all our vows, virtues, and knowledge, all our practices to give up greed and acquisitiveness are meaningless ... Indeed, the pain of others is our own, for the consequences of neglect and apathy cannot be long in coming our way.”

--Mahavira, founder of Jainism

“In all religions, we make a choice about what we emphasize, and I choose to come down on the side of a loving God.”

--Reverend Bernice King

“No man has the right to take God’s place and say another man should die. It destroyed my life.”

--Perry Cobb, who spent eight years on death row in Illinois for a crime he did not commit. He was exonerated in 1987.

“Standing alone among great democratic nations in imposing the death penalty is another moral decision that Americans are being forced to confront.”

--President Jimmy Carter

“The calculated killing of a human being by the state involves, by its very nature, an absolute denial of the executed person’s humanity. The most vile murder does not, in my view, release the state from constitutional restraint on the destruction of human dignity.”

--U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Brennan

“The death penalty doesn’t need your assent to continue ... it needs your indifference.”

--Ray Krone, the 100th innocent person to be released from death row (2002)

“Every chance we get, we need to challenge the mentality that compassion is a weakness. Compassion is the toughest thing of all, but it’s the only thing that works to restore peace on our lives.”

--Carol Byars, member of Murder Victims’ Families for Reconciliation, Houston, Texas

“Criminals, people who commit crimes, usually society rejects these people. They are also part of our society. Give them some form of punishment to say they were wrong, but show them they are part of society and can change. Show them compassion.”

--His Holiness, Dalai Lama

“To me the death penalty is vengeance, and vengeance doesn’t really help anyone in the healing process.”

--Bud Welch, Board President, Murder Victims’ Families for Human Rights. His daughter Julie was killed in Oklahoma City bombing.

“I am pleased that I am able to stand here today and say with a pure heart and meaningful heart that I am against the death penalty. There is no purpose that it serves except to further the damage that death has already done.”

--Mamie Till-Mobley, Mother of Emmitt Till, addressing Illinois Governor George Ryan in her final public appearance, December 2002.

“I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life. We cannot support any act of killing; no killing can be justified. But not to kill is not enough ... If in your thinking you allow the killing to go on, you also break this precept. We must be determined not to condone killing, even in our minds.”

--Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, Zen Buddhist monk, peace activist, scholar, and poet.

“If people are genuinely concerned with the victim’s family’s plight, there should instead be a clamor for the legal and social measures which will provide the real support systems these families need in their time of anguish and irrevocable loss - financial assistance, therapeutic counsel, trial information, resolution etc.”

--Marietta Jaeger-Lane, co-founder of the Journey of Hope ... From Violence to Healing

“The ultimate measure of a person is not where one stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where one stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

--Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“When I became the SDPAC for Connecticut, I knew that I had embarked upon a journey that would change my life in many ways. The more time that went by, the more I realized that I needed (and still need) to bring my work to a deeper level. That led me to correspond with people on death row, and eventually, I began visiting a man on death row. Besides learning more about the prison and judicial system, it put a human face on the part of the death penalty equation that I had not yet encountered. I had already met victims families and those directly touched by murder, I had talked with prosecutors, judges and defense attorneys, but until I met and developed a relationship with a death row inmate, my work was still abstract.”

--Robert Nave, SDPAC Connecticut

“Humankind has to get out of violence only through non-violence. Hatred can be overcome only by love. Counter-hatred only increases the surface as well as the depth of hatred.”

--Mohandas Gandhi

“There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.”

-- Elie Wiesel, 1986 Nobel Peace Laureate and Holocaust Survivor

“A GOP legislator in that district appeared two days after our event at a Catholic legislative forum and was asked his opinion on the death penalty in front of hundreds of people. He said he used to be in favor of the death penalty but has been rethinking his position as he has been ‘educated’ about the issue.”

-- 2004 NWFA Participant, New Jersey

“Our campaign currently is focused on our upcoming legislation, and this event was extremely helpful in reaching a Republican legislator who we had previously thought unreachable. From the pew, he heard (from an exonerated death row inmate) and was very interested in learning more. We have now begun to initiate a dialogue with him.”

--2004 NWFA Participant, New Mexico

“...we as the Church need to express wherever appropriate and wherever possible our stance against the death penalty. We need to talk about it. A lot of people don't feel comfortable in doing this but I think we need to, as the Pope says, preach the whole gospel of life.”

-- Bishop Gabino Zavala, San Gabriel Region of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles

“After the tragedy of losing a loved one to murder we should seek forgiveness and healing, rather than vengeance.”

--Felicia Floyd, member of Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation

“It's ironic that the Bible belt is the killing belt - Texas, Florida, Alabama, Virginia, and so forth, Georgia. Chief executioners.”

--Reverend Joseph Lowery, Chairman, Black Leadership Forum and Co-founder, President Emeritus, Southern Christian Leadership Conference

“I think the clearest manifestation for anyone who doubts that racism and classism exist in America, all one need do is take a real serious objective look at our criminal justice system.”

--Reverend Timothy McDonald, Senior Pastor of First Iconium Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia

“When the state executes a member of the human family, it declares that person worthless, without possibility of redemption. As Christians, we believe this is a heresy, a denial that each human being is created in God’s own image.”

--Douglas Davidson, Co-Editor, The Other Side

“Talk is cheap... It is the way we organize and use our lives everyday that tells what we believe in.”

--Cesar Chavez

“Within Buddhism, there are ten fundamental precepts, and the first precept is ‘I am reverential and mindful of all life. I am not violent. I do not kill.’ And that pretty well sums it up.”

--Kobutsu Shindo, Rinzai Zen Buddhist priest

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”

--Archbishop Desmond Tutu

“To condemn someone to death is to surrender; it proves that you failed. You are not able to change him, to change her; you have to kill him or her. You surrender. ... You only demonstrate your lack of capacity, your helplessness. This is failure.”

--Thich Nhat Hanh, Zen Buddhist monk

“The prophet Zechariah enjoins us: ‘See that justice is done.’ It is our solemn obligation not just to promote justice, but also to stand up and decry injustice when we witness it. The system for administering capital punishment is profoundly flawed.”

--Letter from prominent religious leaders to President Clinton, 2000

“Violence just hurts those who are already hurt...Instead of exposing the brutality of the oppressor, it justifies it.”

--Cesar Chavez

“A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew the appeal for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary.”

--Pope John Paul II

“The word Muslim actually means ‘one who practices peace.’ One of the root words of Islam is salaam - peace. Within the Koran in Sura 23:93 it says, ‘repel evil with that which is fairer.’ I believe one of the most evil things possible is for the state to kill someone in vengeance - in an attempt to make things right. That is clearly an evil that I must oppose.”

--Greg Abdur Rasheed, a Sunni Muslim and coordinator for the American Friends Service Committee

“I am terrified that the Jewish community, and indeed all people of faith, are going to wake up one day and say, ‘My God, what are we doing!?’ And it may be too late - it’ll certainly be too late for those who have been killed.”

--Marshall Dayan, Law Professor and Vice-Chair of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism

“...in Islam, for a verified murder, the death penalty is one of three options. One may ask for life for life, one may ask for a fine, or one may ask for forgiveness. All of these three have equal religious merit in and of themselves, except that the Qur’an and the Prophet both validate forgiveness as being superior to the other options.”

--Rabia Terri Harris, founder and coordinator of the Muslim Peace Fellowship

“...we need some clergy with some backbone, who don’t mind making uncomfortable at times those who are very comfortable, and challenging them at the core of their faith, at least causing them to pause and to have dialogue and to be open for further discussion.”

--Reverend Timothy McDonald, Senior Pastor at First Iconium Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia

“Thus, the dimensions of our tradition’s discussion of the processes, utility, and values associated with a capital punishment system are highly relevant to the contemporary debates over these very issues. As is often the case, the Torah does not offer a one-sided view of an issue but reflects the Divine nature of God’s creation in incorporating and balancing multiple and competing values that are inherent to any human challenge. While recognizing there are multiple means to fulfill a single goal, in its heart, Judaism is devoted to championing each human life as unique and sacred.”

--Nathan J. Diament, Director of the Institute for Public Affairs of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America

“The death penalty says, ‘It’s over. We hold no hope for you.’ When you look at Jesus’ life, you come to a different conclusion. His mission was one of redemption and love and mercy and forgiveness. The death penalty just writes folks off.”

--Dr. Ronald Hingdon, Southern Baptist minister

“We oppose capital punishment not just for what it does to those guilty of horrible crimes, but for what it does to all of us as a society. Increasing reliance on the death penalty diminishes all of us and is a sign of growing disrespect for human life. We cannot overcome crime by simply executing criminals, nor can we restore the lives of the innocent by ending the lives of those convicted of their murders. The death penalty offers the tragic illusion that we can defend life by taking life.”

--Administrative Committee of the United States Catholic Conference, March 24, 1999

“It’s interesting to me that killing damages the image of God when it’s done by a person, but it doesn’t damage it when it’s done by the state.”

--Reverend Joseph Lowery, Chairman, Black Leadership Forum and Co-founder, President Emeritus, Southern Christian Leadership Conference

“The challenge of curbing crime and reshaping the criminal justice system is not just a matter of public policy, but is also a test of Catholic commitment. In the face of so much violence and crime, our faith calls the Church to responsibility and action.”

--U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops