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Who has the right to die?

by Kathy Christian

There is a moral and ethical dilemma facing Americans today—a dilemma which has been around thousands of years. The question is, "Who has the right to live and who has the right to die?" The execution of a convicted murderer, Gary Mark Gilmore, has rekindled this apparently unsolvable issue.

It would appear that Gilmore had no moral code of his own. As a young teenager Gilmore was jailed for breaking school windows, and since then he has been in and out of penal institutions for various reasons: vagrancy, auto theft, grand larceny, and assault and robbery.

In July, 1976, Gilmore was sentenced for killing two men during two separate robberies. Both victims left a widow and a child. No one has the right to take the life of another human being. It is as simple as that. Or is it?

If the life of another is not to be taken, then what about the life of oneself? The law says that this is also unconstitutional. Apparently, Gilmore had no sense whatsoever of ethics. He took the lives of others and tried to take his own life. He even convinced his girlfriend to make a suicide pact with him, but alas, they were unsuccessful.

What right did Gilmore have on deciding who should die and when they should die? It is not a right of human kind.

Gilmore wanted to die: there was no question about it. First, two suicide attempts, and then a plea to the law to allow him to "die like a man" by waiving his appeal.

As an answer to his prayers, the Supreme Court had recently ruled that the death penalty is constitutional when it is applied in very limited circumstances.

By the way, what are "limited circumstances?" Who decides which are limited

(ethical) and which are unlimited (unethical)? Would Gilmore's execution, if it had been carried out by his own suicide attempts, have been less ethical than if it had been carried out by a firing squad?

The questions of the rights to life and death should not be answered by mere mortals. The ethical questions are especially prevalent today as new laws are passed concerning abortion and euthanasia. And the question seems also to include the ethics of warfare.

The dilemma might not be as severe if persons lived by moral principles and values. The right to life is an individual right; in fact, it is a gift.

The right to death is also individual and should be taken up between the person and his God.

Maybe Gary Gilmore did contribute something to society: Maybe he motivated people to become dedicated to their ethical standards.

Keeping our ruts

Hiram Bubulus, a prosperous tobacco farmer from Smithfield, was at Meredith the other day with his daughter Elvira, who plans to enroll next fall. I had the honor of escorting Mr. Bubulus around the campus while Elvira talked with officers in the admissions office.

I guess it was his farmer's eye that picked out the deep furrows and ruts leading from the dormitories to the road.

"What y'all doin' drivin' yoah cars all ovah the grass like that? Don't they learn y'all no manna's at this heah Murdith?" he exclaimed.

"Oh yessir, we hear about manners all the time," I replied. "These ruts are simply a new campus experiment. Perhaps you'd like to hear about it—maybe you can give us a few ideas, too."

He seemed interested, although I remember he muttered something under his breath about "those crazy college folks always tryin' to do somethin' new."

"What you see, sir, is just the beginning of an experiment in survival farming," I began. "We feel that Meredith is obligated to teach its students how to conserve energy, become self-sufficient in providing our own food, and so on. We think it's real important to be prepared for the hard times ahead."

"Well, whut have all these hyere ruts got to do with e-collargy?" Mr. Bubulus asked.

"These ruts," I explained, "are our attempts to plow the ground. We're still experimenting with our equipment. You see, sir, we are limited to using our cars. The whole point of the experiment is to learn to 'survive' with the materials we have at hand."

"Well, y'all ain't doin' such a hot job ovah theah," he said, pointing to the strip of land behind Brewer dormitory leading to the front drive. "Y'all barely even killed the grass."

"I know, sir, but that was only our first attempt. That time we just tried driving our cars from one parking lot to another. We discovered from that trial that we needed more weight in the car. We get the extra weight now with three or four passengers, five large suitcases, three hanging bags full of clothes, a stereo, a stack of records, a television set, and fifteen potted plants. Usually a little bit of rain helps."

"Oh yeah. Ah see wheah y'all ah makin' real progress." He surveyed the area around the Beehive and between Poteat and Barefoot dormitories.

"Yep, y'all ah gettin' the hang of it alright," he said approvingly.

He admired our handiwork a while longer and then asked, "Well, when do y'all do yoah plowin'?"

"Weekends and school holidays," I answered. "We drive our cars up to the dormitories on the day we leave, load them up with everything we own, put the cars in low gear, and spin out. We do pretty much the same thing when we return."

Mr. Bubulus, I could see, was very impressed. "Well, now, this ain't nothin' new a-toll," he said. "Ah'm real glad to see you Nawth Cahlahna ladies stickin' to yoah rural heritage—you might even say y'all ah preservin' yoah 'ruts'!" he said, falling into hysterics.

I laughed too, although I couldn't quite see the humor of what he'd said. We walked back to Johnson Hall, and when we were saying goodbye, he mentioned he'd like to help us out with our project.

"How 'bout if ahsend y'all about a thousand pounds of fertilizer?" he suggested.

I thanked him politely but refused, reckoning we had enough manure on this campus already.

MSO

Is question ethics or health?

by Maggie Odell

Miss Christian's essay on Gary Gilmore's execution compels an answer from me. I respond to no particular point of argument, but from an entirely different point of view. I do not wish to disagree with her, nor do I wish to support capital punishment; rather, I would like to point out how confused our attitude toward suicide and execution is.

Those of us who are angered by a criminal's wanting to die should try to recall the times we most felt like giving up our own lives. They were times, I remember, of absolute dejection, feelings of total failure, and fear of life. If I continue to live, will I continue to fail?

I recall junior high school creative writing magazines in which the most common themes of all contributors were blighted love and death. I remember my own maudlin thoughts in high school and the empathy I felt with Shakespeare's Hamlet, who could never quite make up his mind whether it was better to be or not to be.

We should also recall that the strongest appeal of the Christian faith is to be able to die to our old selves in order to be born anew in Christ. We Baptists keep the ritual of dying alive in the ordinance of Baptism, a symbol of Christ's own death, burial, and resurrection. Perhaps this one ceremony alone recognizes the death wish hidden deep in all of us.

Those of us who insist that suicide is a crime should be reminded that Western man has never been very definite about his stance on self-slaughter. We admire men who willingly give up their lives for a cause. Socrates stands with Christ as a man who gave his life in the cause of truth. Warriors receive

special honor. Spartans were instructed by their mothers to return from battle with their shields or on them. Germanic peoples were not taken to Valhalla, the heaven of warriors, unless they had died a violent death on the battlefield.

On the other hand, self-willed death born out of depression has long been frowned upon. Suicides were buried at busy crossroads, not in the church yards. The estates of suicides were transferred to the government, while spouse and children were left destitute.

Most paradoxically, attempted suicides were condemned to die for their efforts. There is a bizarre eighteenth century account of the execution of a man who had attempted to die by slitting his throat. When the authorities hanged him for the offense, the gash in his throat kept the rope from strangling him immediately. After several hours and several tries by the executioners, the man finally died. An eye for an eye, one's life for one's life.

Now back to Gary Gilmore: Did he have a right to demand execution? Gilmore, like the suicides of the eighteenth century, would probably have felt more

punished if he had been forced to live in silent torment. If the American penal system were interested solely in punishment, the best kind of punishment would have been to give Gilmore exactly what he did not want: life.

A hundred years ago, Kierkegaard presented Gilmore's choice disarmingly: "Which is worse, to be executed or to be trampled to death by geese?" This was Gilmore's choice, to end it all at once, or to endure a mild, maddening internal struggle with the meaning of life, his frustration of not being able to live fully, and the misunderstanding scorn and psychoanalyzing of others.

By any standard of healthiness, Gary Gilmore was less than healthy. He certainly was in no shape to make ethical decisions. And perhaps the lesson of Gilmore's execution is, that we are not healthy enough to consider ethics, either. What we should be considering is not whether or how society can conduct its executions ethically, but whether society permits us all to live in health, in an understanding of what it means to live and die.

Letters

DEAR EDITOR

Over any given weekend a large stack of mail accumulates on the post office window ledge. It is generally understood that incorrect deliveries are left here for re-delivery.

Unfortunately, in looking through the stacks for my mail I noticed three opened envelopes which just happened to be from a stationery company known to include samples in their advertisements.

Needless to say, the samples had been removed—which brings to mind another incident. A magazine

of mine was left on the ledge by a friend who receives her mail at my old address. I never received it.

Perhaps the post office should consider adding another slot for incorrect deliveries. Yet, I think the implication here is deeper than that. Meredith students live under an honor system, and no amount of rationalization justifies theft. I hope every Meredith student will reconsider her commitment to the honor code in all aspects of community life.

Sincerely,
Suzanne Styron

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