

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT OR CAPITAL FORGIVENESS? THE ENDURING MESSAGE OF *DEAD MAN WALKING*

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ABSTRACT

The best-selling book and internationally popular film *Dead Man Walking* address squarely the issue of capital punishment which has been extensively debated throughout much of the world and challenged the ethical thinking of Christian and non-Christian moralists. Although this question is treated in *Dead Man Walking* in an explicitly Roman Catholic context in the United States of America, the ethical and spiritual dimensions of its treatment on the screen transcend geographical and denominational borders and are particularly relevant to South Africa, where escalating violence in recent years has engendered a callousness and spirit of vengefulness in many quarters and where public support for the death penalty is strong.

1. THE DEBATE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Does the issue of the death penalty have eternal life? Since the late nineteenth century capital punishment has gradually been abrogated in most European countries as well as in many lands elsewhere, yet this ghoulish Phoenix has been resurrected hither and yon as a supposedly effective means of dealing with escalating rates of violent crime or other unusual circumstances. Norway, for example, outlawed the death penalty for peacetime offences shortly after 1900 but temporarily revived it shortly after the conclusion of the Second World War in order to liquidate Vidkun Quisling and other prominent collaborators with the German occupation regime. In the United States of America, the Supreme Court ruled in 1972 that capital punishment laws, as then enforced, were unconstitutional, but with different justices on that exalted bench the death penalty rose from this judicially dug grave in 1977 and has been

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subsequently used in hundreds of cases. Calls for its reinstatement have reverberated in many other countries, including South Africa, where a moratorium on executions began in 1990 as part of the negotiations towards a new political dispensation and where the Constitutional Court declared in 1995 that the death penalty violated the foundational right to life.

Amnesty International and other civil and political rights organisations continue to demand a global ban on capital punishment. Its defenders, however, have been equally vocal in insisting that it be reinstated (or preserved, as the case may be) as the only appropriate punishment for particularly heinous crimes. In South Africa the New National Party has emphasised its support for such a move, as has the African Christian Democratic Party. This is a position with broad public appeal. Very shortly before the general elections of June 1999 one major poll indicated that no fewer than 74 per cent of South Africans favoured the reintroduction of the death penalty.² This confirmed a well-established trend in the country.

South African Christians have not spoken univocally on capital punishment. In one survey conducted in 1990, criminological researchers found that Christian respondents were both more likely than compatriot adherents of other religions to favour more frequent application of the death penalty *and* more prone to call for its abrogation (Parekh and de la Rey 1996:110).

South African participants in the debate over this issue have argued their cases on both secular and religious grounds. In the former arena of contention, little of novelty has developed, and in any case that dimension lies outside the scope of the present essay. Christian theologians have both staunchly defended and severely criticised the death penalty for many years. The arguments of two diametrically opposed churchmen will illustrate the lack of unity on this grave issue. David Walker, a deacon in the Church of the Province of Southern Africa, contended in 1996 that capital punishment was "essentially a barbaric act" and found it morally unacceptable that

2 "Reality Check", *The Star* (Johannesburg), (28 April 1999), p.9.

condemned prisoners often had to wait more than a year to be executed. "The whole process is a form of torture which involves a mental and physical assault on the convicted person", judged Walker. Seeking to counter the well-worn argument that the threat of being put to death acted as a deterrent to violent criminal behaviour, he asserted that it did not. Moreover, Walker dismissed evidence from public opinion polls that most South Africans favoured a return of capital punishment, arguing that one purpose of the Bill of Rights and the Constitutional Court was "to protect individuals and minorities from the vagaries of public opinion". Although he titled the essay in which he propounded these views "Theological Reflection on Public Policy", he made little effort to apply Biblical or other religious insights to the matter at hand (Walker 1996:85-88).

At the opposite pole, Professor Benjamin Engelbrecht of the University of the Witwatersrand constructed his defence of capital punishment almost exclusively on conventional theological grounds. This Dutch Reformed theologian did so in 1990, i.e. shortly after its suspension in South Africa. Abolition of the death penalty, Engelbrecht averred in postulating a dichotomy which not all Christian theologians would accept, was a theological and not an ethical issue. Noting that capital punishment was divinely instituted in both natural and Mosaic law, this senior scholar stressed its inherent staying power in a world of shifting human attitudes:

Die teologie gaan immers aan die etiek vooraf. En daar is geen teologiese plofstof wat kragtig genoeg is om die struktuur waarin die doodstraf ingebou is, te implodeer nie. Hierdie struktuur is die heilige Reg van God (Engelbrecht 1992:1,10).

On the Roman Catholic side of the ledger, the South African bishops voted in 1990 to state publicly its opposition to the hangings which had given the country one of the world's highest per capita rates of capital punishment. Acting two days before State President F.W. de Klerk announced that no executions would take place until Parliament had decided on governmental proposals to reform the application of the death sentence, the Catholic prelates strongly voiced their rejection of capital punishment because as

practised in South Africa it was "fraught with racial discrimination" and, in the words of Bishop Reginald Orsmond of Johannesburg,

is more the symbol of an unjust and uncaring social order than a remedy restoring justice and peace to society. In this it clearly contradicts all that Jesus lived and died for.

These churchmen called for the appointment of a commission to inquire into all facets of the death penalty and to examine its relation to the widespread violence in South Africa. They also encouraged a nationwide educational campaign to enlighten the public about the wider moral implications of capital punishment. This was the first official stand the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference took on the issue, but it would not be the last.³ Five years later, the same body welcomed the decision of the Constitutional Court to abolish the death penalty.⁴

For many years both secular and religious opponents of the death penalty in South Africa have found inspiration and enlightenment from abroad. They have quoted criminological statistics, moral philosophers, Christian ethicists, and other sources, as have defenders of capital punishment. Indicative of the global scope of the issue, South Africans who have debated it have marshalled evidence from such countries as India (Cottrell 1991), Hungary (Van Zyl Smit 1994), Ghana (Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church of Ghana 1990), and the United States of America (Hintze 1994). Perhaps most notably, in April 1995, i.e. shortly before the Constitutional Court ruled out the death penalty, Michael Shackleton, the editor of the South African Roman Catholic newspaper *The Southern Cross*, referred to widespread American public support for the retention of capital punishment in an editorial which stood obliquely against it (Shackleton 1995).

3 Winnie Graham, "Death penalty 'fraught with racial discrimination'", *The Southern Cross*, 3620 (18 February 1990), p. 5.

4 "End to hanging pleases bishops", *The Southern Cross*, 3897 (18 June 1995), p. 1.

Since 1995, the film *Dead Man Walking* has testified as a graphic witness against the capital punishment. This American product was soon circulated in South Africa as part of its nearly global distribution, yet scholarly discussion of it in this country has been scant. The present essay is intended as a modest step in the direction of filling that lacuna. We shall first touch on the general position which the Roman Catholic bishops in the United States have taken on this issue, then consider both the film *Dead Man Walking* and the book of the same title on which it is based.

Both religious and secular depictions of the execution of criminals have prompted discussion of this issue for several centuries. One need not search long in the annals of European and North American literature to discover ramifications of the topic graphically treated in such works as Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Dostoevski's *The Idiot*, Orwell's *A Hanging*, Camus' *Reflections on the Guillotine*, and Capote's *In Cold Blood*. The release of the feature film *Dead Man Walking* in 1995 added an eye-opening voice to the debate, one which captured the attention of audiences on an intercontinental basis. Written and directed by Tim Robbins, and starring his common-law wife, Susan Sarandon, who received an Academy Award in the "Best Actress" category for her performance, as well as Sean Penn, this work vividly portrays the ministry of Sister Helen Prejean, a plain-clothes member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, to an inmate on death row in the crime-ridden state of Louisiana. To a considerable extent, the film is a faithful adaptation of the spirit and content of her book of the same title, which was initially published in 1993 (Prejean 1993).

Prejean and Robbins both oppose capital punishment and employ, either directly or indirectly, her gripping memoir of her activities as a spiritual counsellor to men facing punitive death as a vehicle for publicising their case. In doing so, they broach arguments *pro* and *con*, thereby adding armloads of fresh fuel to the fires of dispute. Particularly relevant from a Christian ethical viewpoint in this regard is the presentation of religious grounds which have been adduced in the debate.

In the present essay, we shall consider how the film *Dead Man Walking* serves as a vehicle for these arguments. We shall examine

how in certain respects Robbins's script proceeds beyond Prejean's book while in others it does not, and indeed could not reasonably have been expected to, and treat matters which she addressed, often in considerable detail, in that work. It will also be emphasised, however, that the film is not merely a discussion of a burning social ethical issue but also a poignant study of evangelistic ministry to an inmate on death row.

2. AMERICAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS AND CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Before proceeding with our deliberation of these contentions, it should be underscored that during the latter half of the twentieth century there has never been a consensus amongst North American Roman Catholics on this heated issue. In November 1980, almost four years after a volley from rifles pointed at convicted murderer Gary Gilmore in Utah had heralded the return of the death penalty in the United States and with more than 500 inmates awaiting execution nationally, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops discussed the issue in detail and adopted by a vote of 145 to thirty-one, with forty-one abstentions, a statement calling for the abrogation of capital punishment. The bishops consciously sought to avoid breaking new doctrinal ground and acknowledged that

Catholic teaching has accepted the principle that the state has the right to take the life of a person guilty of an extremely serious crime

and that therefore advocacy of capital punishment was not "incompatible with Catholic tradition". Nevertheless, they argued on the basis of what were by then quite conventional grounds that "in the conditions of contemporary American society" imposition of the death penalty was not justified as a form of retribution, a deterrent to other crimes, or, obviously, a means of reforming and rehabilitating felons.⁵

5 "Statement on Capital Punishment", *Origins* X 24 (27 November 1980), pp. 375, 377.

The American bishops also contended that the abolition of capital punishment would "promote values that are important to us as citizens and as Christians". It would, they believed, proclaim that the *circulus vitiosus* of violence can be broken, challenge society to find ways of dealing with serious crime that "manifest intelligence and compassion rather than power and vengeance", underscore Christian commitment to the sanctity of human life, testify to belief that God and not man is the Lord of life, and be consonant with Jesus' central example of forgiveness.⁶ Furthermore, the assembled clerics noted that the difficulties inherent in capital punishment included the possibility that innocent people would be executed accidentally, the elimination of opportunities for criminals to compensate creatively for their misdeeds, the extreme emotional agony which criminals' families and other loved ones inescapably endure, the stimulating of acrimonious public feelings, and racial bias in the application of the death penalty.⁷

The 1980 statement long served as the definitive expression of official Roman Catholic opinion in the United States of America. Eleven years later, the United States Catholic Conference Administrative Board reaffirmed its opposition to capital punishment, citing this earlier document as one foundation of its own position. Without breaking any virginal doctrinal soil, members of the Administrative Board declared that the reinstated death penalty had inevitably led to "further erosion of respect for life in our society" and issued a challenge to

seek methods of dealing with violent crime which are more consistent with the Gospel vision of respect for life and Christ's message of healing love.⁸

The broad Roman Catholic laity, which comprises approximately one-quarter of the population in the United States of America, has long been of a different mind, as have their non-Catholic compatriots

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 375-376.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 376-377.

8 "Political Responsibility: Revitalizing American Democracy", *Origins* XXI 20 (24 October 1991), p.319.

in general. A Gallup poll conducted in 1991 indicated that no fewer than 76 per cent of respondents replied affirmatively when asked whether they favoured the death penalty for persons convicted of murder. Of the remainder, only 18 per cent were opposed, while 6 per cent offered no opinion. By contrast, twenty years earlier merely 49 per cent had advocated capital punishment for convicted murderers. The 1991 survey found virtually no difference along religious lines; 77 per cent of both Protestants and Roman Catholics favoured the death penalty. Indeed, regardless of gender, age, income level, region of the country, ideological identity as "liberal", "moderate", or "conservative", and educational level, a majority of people in the United States of America then supported the execution of persons convicted of homicide (Gallup 1991:128-129).

3. SISTER HELEN PREJEAN'S BOOK

In *Dead Man Walking*, her first book, Prejean does not attempt to present dispassionately her case against the death penalty. Instead, she has chosen the genre of memoir and embedded in her account of ministering to two young condemned men the reasons for her revulsion at and opposition to capital punishment. She describes how she became involved in *ad hoc* prison ministry while serving as a teacher in a public housing project in New Orleans. Upon the request of a representative of a private advocacy organisation called the Prison Coalition, Prejean began to correspond with, and subsequently visit regularly, Elmo Patrick Sonnier, a convicted murderer who was awaiting death in the electric chair in the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. This condemned man readily accepted her friendship and her offer to become his spiritual counsellor. Prejean remained in this capacity while lawyers made a series of unsuccessful attempts to postpone Sonnier's execution or have it commuted to a life sentence. Eventually she succeeded in convincing him to accept moral responsibility for his misdeed and, she believes, to develop a relationship to God. Prejean was present when 1 900 volts of electricity surged through his body in 1982. She relates in less detail how she served another murderer on death row in the same institution, Robert Willie, a sneering, self-confident young man who similarly welcomed her ministrations but never showed noteworthy

signs of repentance. He, too, died in the electric chair as Prejean witnessed his execution. Her account of her endeavours to minister to these two men forms the principal narrative thread in her book, while other strands include the story of her emotionally demanding and sometimes frustrating encounters with political leaders, survivors of the murder victims, prison chaplains, members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in Louisiana, and other individuals as she emerged as an increasingly well-known advocate of efforts to abolish capital punishment in her home state and, subsequently, on a national basis.

Prejean intersperses in her narrative her arguments against the death penalty. Some of these reasons grow directly out of her Christian faith and theological training, while others are of a pragmatic nature. Prejean makes no pretence to being a systematic or moral theologian, and her argumentation is generally fragmentary and poorly developed. At the heart of Prejean's protest against the taking of life lies an imitative ethic. She believes that God is a deity of love and that Jesus Christ, the incarnate of God, "refused to meet hate with hate and violence with violence" (1993:21). Prejean thus finds no justification or other reward in the common human reaction of vengeance which underlies many demands for retribution. She acknowledges that popes, military officers, and heads of states have taken upon themselves the task of serving as "God's Avengers" but insists bluntly, "I do not believe in such a God" (1993:21). Prejean's social philosophy does not appear to be any more sophisticated, but at any rate she categorically rules out the taking of life by the state:

For me, the negotiable moral bedrock on which a society must be built is that killing by anyone, under any conditions, cannot be tolerated. And that includes the government (1993:31).

Ergo, there is simply no room for capital punishment in Prejean's vision of any society, whether Christian or otherwise.

Beyond her foundational principles, Prejean broaches numerous other reasons for abolishing the death penalty. During the 1980s, she discovered that in Louisiana Governor Edwin Edwards and other politicians repeatedly exploited it as a political issue. Furthermore, questions of race and economic status came to the fore; Prejean soon

learnt that disproportionately far more African-Americans than European-Americans were executed after committing similar crimes, and those who thus died were almost invariably unable to afford top-flight legal counsel and were consequently represented by marginally effective public defenders. Capital punishment, moreover, had failed to reduce the homicide rate, and the seemingly endless rounds of legal steps implemented to safeguard the rights of the condemned and, hopefully, virtually eliminate the possibility of innocent people being executed were considerably more costly than lifelong incarceration. Prejean scoffs at the notion that electrocution is a painless means of taking a person's life and cites various examples of apparently extreme suffering in the electric chair. All of this, of course, is in addition to the emotional pain to which inmates on death row and their families are subjected. Finally, she relates how the deaths of murderers have failed to satisfy the psychological needs of the survivors of their victims, who in some cases have enmeshed themselves in webs of despair and chronic grief by nurturing vengeful thoughts year after year.

4. THE MULTIPLE THEMES AND ARGUMENTATION OF THE FILM

Prejean's book became a minor best seller within months of its release in 1993. The following year it caught the attention of Susan Sarandon, the heralded American actress who was then involved in the production of the film *The Client* in Memphis. Sarandon contacted Prejean in New Orleans shortly thereafter and informed her of her desire to play her strong part if a film based on *Dead Man Walking* were produced. Sarandon's common-law husband, actor and director Tim Robbins, also read the book, and when Prejean flew to New York to meet him before the end of 1994, he revealed his goal of producing the film.⁹ Prejean agreed to the project, explaining in an interview that "Tim does films he believes in" and that she therefore felt confident that a high degree of moral and spiritual integrity would be maintained.¹⁰

9 Judy Pennington, "Helen Prejean", *The Progressive* LX 1 (January 1996), pp. 32-33.

10 "Live nun talking", *Maclean's* 10 June 1996, p. 60.

The moderately intellectual Robbins, who held a baccalaureate degree from the University of California in Los Angeles and was then in his mid-thirties, elected to write the screenplay himself. On the surface, at least, he was an unlikely candidate for this task. Robbins's earlier work in the cinema, most notably his part in the baseball film *Bull Durham*, did not evince any interest in Christian social ethics. Furthermore, his outspoken advocacy, and that of Sarandon, of abortion rights could not have warmed the hearts of observant Roman Catholics. On the other hand, he had supported MADRE, an organisation which provides nutritional assistance and health care in economically underdeveloped countries. At least this young Californian shared with the religious sister from New Orleans a keen interest in social activism. Yet Robbins' initial attempt did not fully please Prejean. She reportedly returned his script after repeatedly writing "Stamp out nunisms" in the margins. Prejean was perturbed because Robbins had her voice such pious phrases as "God bless you, you're a saint".¹¹ Notwithstanding minor tensions of this sort, the script was completed promptly, casting was done expeditiously, and the film, also titled *Dead Man Walking*, was produced on schedule. Sarandon's wish to play Prejean was fulfilled. The controversial Sean Penn took the other leading role, namely that of an inmate whom she counsels on death row.

Robbins took a moderate degree of artistic liberty in transforming much of Prejean's book into a film script. Within the credits at the conclusion of the film, a printed message informs viewers that what they have seen was "inspired by the events in the life of Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ" and that this "dramatization" encompasses unspecified "composite and fictional characters and incidents". Nevertheless, when judged by late twentieth-century cinematic standards, the film is generally an unsensational, responsible representation of many of the themes in Prejean's volume.

To be sure, the film differs in certain pivotal respects from her book. It is not, of course, a first-person narrative, although Prejean's constant presence in the plot (Sarandon appears in nearly every scene, apart from numerous flashbacks to the murders and rape which led to the condemnation of the central criminal figure) give it the flavour

11 *Ibid.*

of an intensely personal account. Furthermore, Robbins has neatly conflated the two murderers to whom Prejean ministered at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, Elmo Patrick Sonnier and Robert Willie, into a composite named Matthew Poncelet, who embodies the eventual penitence of the former and much of the impertinent personality of the latter. This artistically successful fundamental restructuring gives the film more continuity and focus than the book. Thirdly, both Sonnier and Willie died in the electric chair, whereas in deference to a recent change in the execution technique employed in Louisiana, Poncelet is put to death by lethal injection in a procedure which his lawyer describes in excruciating, graphic detail. The governor of that state is no longer the historical person Edwin Edwards, but a fictitious one named Benedict. Robbins achieves considerable visual effect by interspersing in the narrative nocturnal scenes of the crime, particularly to represent how Prejean might imagine them as she seeks to carry out her ministry to a convicted but only belatedly repentant murderer. Less responsible and less plausible is a gratuitous scene in which Poncelet assures his female spiritual adviser that she is sexually attractive. Prejean responds by objecting to what she terms his "man on the make games". This scene is an apparent and anomalous compromising of the historic account in the interest of cinematic prurience. It is very brief, however, and does not significantly diminish the credibility of either Sarandon or Penn in voicing the serious themes in their dialogue. Generally speaking, the dominant character of Prejean undergoes a greater metamorphosis on the screen than is apparent in the pages of her memoir. Initially questioning the desirability of granting Poncelet clemency, she soon becomes convinced of both the moral indefensibility of capital punishment and her vocation to serve as his spiritual counsellor as he awaits his death. The benevolent sister thereby overcomes the objections of her mother and others who encourage her to devote her time to other forms of social ministry, such as focusing her attention on preventing children from becoming criminals.

Within this moderately modified framework, Robbins teaches several of the themes which Prejean emphasises in her book. Almost immediately he establishes a tone of hostility to death row. Poncelet

describes his living conditions there in a letter to Prejean as essentially having to spend twenty-three hours daily in a cell that measures six by eight feet. He states bluntly that he and the other inmates on death row are "going to fry" and that at times he feels like a sow on a farm being fattened for slaughter.

A second theme involves a fundamental question in social ethics, namely the relationship between poverty and the likelihood of being sentenced to death. An unidentified African-American man who apparently is employed at the St. Thomas housing project, as is Prejean, discusses with her efforts to assist death row inmates and points out that "of course, none of these guys on the row can afford their own attorneys for appeals". Poncelet tells Prejean bluntly during their first encounter, "Ain't nobody with money on death row". The lawyer who has devoted part of his career to advocacy of condemned men, Hilton Barbour (a fictional character inspired by the attorney Millard Farmer who appears in the book), echoes the point when he argues Poncelet's case before the Louisiana Pardon Board. "Poncelet is here today because he is poor", he declares flatly. Barbour substantiates his argument by pointing out that the court-appointed lawyer who served as the defence counsel had no previous experience in such cases and had raised only one objection during the trial. By contrast, he contends, a wealthy defendant would have been able to hire a team of specialist attorneys, trial consultants, and the like and thereby marshal a potentially far more effective defence. Poncelet's own recollections in conversations with Prejean cast additional light on his economically underprivileged life as the son of a sharecropper who took his son to a bar at age twelve and died when Poncelet was fourteen. On the other hand, Robbins avoids a simplistic argument resting solely on social determinism by having Prejean's articulate brother affirm during a family dinner that most poor youngsters do not become murderers and rapists. The presentation of this underlying theme of poverty in *Dead Man Walking* occupies an aggregate of no more than two or three minutes in the dialogue, but it is incisive and effective.

Much the same can be said of Robbins's multiple voicing of Prejean's point concerning the place of politics as a factor maintaining the death penalty, although this is developed at considerably

greater length. The first explicit instance of this occurs when Prejean hears Governor Benedict proclaim in a speech broadcast as part of his campaign for re-election that he will “get tough” on crime. Emphasising the point, Poncelet telephones Prejean during this televised speech to inform her that the date for his execution has just been set. Shortly thereafter, he explains to her during one of her visits that a certain date was chosen to serve the interests of Benedict’s campaign. The sagacious Barbour, who is also present, confirms that “politics did play a big part in this decision” and underscores the point by stressing to Poncelet that during his appearance before the Pardon Board that matter should not be raised, because the Board consists of political appointees who would resent it. Instead, Barbour’s rhetorical strategy is to present Poncelet as a normal human being rather than the violent “monster” he has become in the court of public opinion. This approach fails, of course, as does an eleventh-hour personal appeal to Governor Benedict, which instead of a private audience becomes a televised appearance with an obvious political purpose. Poncelet subsequently assumes that he has no chance of avoiding death by lethal injection in the near future and tells Prejean that because two blacks have just been executed the governor will be under pressure to avoid charges of racism by insisting that the next inmate to die be a white man.

When one considers the prominent place of these arguments in *Dead Man Walking*, the assertions of some reviewers that this film presents a balanced case for and against capital punishment lose their credibility. Very little in it supports the former position. Repeatedly, advocates of the death penalty adduce in decontextualised form the “eye for an eye” dictum of Hebrew Scriptures (particularly Leviticus 24: 17-20), but equally frequently their opponents counter that in the New Testament Christianity goes far beyond an ethic of vengeance by emphasising grace and reconciliation. Practically nothing in *Dead Man Walking* other than the many flashbacks to the vicious rape and murder scene supports capital punishment, and even they arguably do little more than emphasise that the taking of a human life by the state is an act of revenge which perpetuates the cycle of violence.

Of seminal importance in both the book and the film is the question of ministering not only to condemned men but also, with painful difficulty, to the families of their victims. Robbins develops this theme at length and with great effect, following it through to the final scene. The initial impetus comes from Prejean's brother at the previously mentioned family meal. He asks her forthrightly whether in addition to Poncelet she has visited the parents of the two teenagers of whose deaths he has been found guilty. She admits that she has not. In a subsequent scene, while the Pardon Board deliberates Mr. Delacroix, the father of the youth who was slain, accosts Prejean and enquires why she has not called on them. Taken by surprise, the nun apologises profusely and offers him her telephone number in case he needs her, an act which he rejects as arrogant. Prejean nevertheless calls on Delacroix, who reluctantly invites her into his home and discusses questions concerning the grief that he and his estranged wife have endured during the six years since their son's violent death. Later Prejean visits the Percys, whose daughter was raped and murdered. They speak candidly and cordially through their grief until Prejean discloses that she remains Poncelet's spiritual adviser. Unable to understand how she can lend him moral support while simultaneously seeking to minister to them, the Percys bluntly ask her to leave their house. There is no reconciliation between that bereaved couple and Prejean, but she eventually becomes better acquainted with Delacroix after Poncelet is executed. He admits that he remains full of hate and initially responds sceptically when she suggests that they seek to work through his hatred co-operatively. In the penultimate scene, however, these two are shown praying shoulder-to-shoulder in a pew of a rural church. *Dead Man Walking* ends with a camera panning the exterior of that building, suggesting the encompassing power of grace and forgiveness within a Christian context. Conspicuously absent from this dimension of the film, though, in contrast to its prominent place in the book, is Prejean's repeated insistence that parents' attempts to overcome their grief through vengeance usually prove futile.

The core of the film, like that of the book, is neither sociological nor political analysis of capital punishment, but Prejean's effective ministry to the condemned. Robbins artistically weaves together in

his creation of Poncelet strands from her accounts of Prejean's partially successful efforts to convince both Sonnier and Willie into confessing their sins and accepting responsibility for them in order to receive God's grace. With this composite figure, the sister's task is compounded by his arrogance, persistent state of denial, and penchant for blaming others for his doleful lot in life. Penn plays the character to the fullest. He projects a slimy, villainous image replete with well-worn signs of human degeneracy as he smirks almost constantly, peppers his diction with vulgarities, butchers conventional English grammar, nervously smokes cigarettes grasped in his manacled hands, and - inconsistently - speaks with a modified Cajun accent characteristic of the French-descended population of rural Louisiana. Prejean's efforts to prod him towards moral accountability are artfully interwoven with her and others' endeavours to gain clemency. Without either of these vital elements, *Dead Man Walking* would arguably be less than half the film that it is with both present.

Even higher in the film than in the book is the hurdle Prejean must clear in the office of the Roman Catholic prison chaplain, Father Farley. Evidently hostile to her *ab initio*, this traditional cleric derides her for not wearing a nun's habit and seeks to discourage her from serving as a spiritual advisor to prisoners, whom he obviously holds in low esteem. He tells her gratuitously that there is "no romance" within the prison walls and insists that the prisoners are "all con men". Father Farley suggests that "bleeding heart sympathy" may have prompted Prejean to become involved in prison ministry. In a subsequent confrontation between these two, the priest berates her for participating in a protest rally during a recent nocturnal execution. Defending penal practices, he asks her sarcastically whether she is familiar with the Old Testament commandment, "Thou shall not kill". Her skills at *repartée* apparently finely honed, Prejean retorts immediately, "Are you familiar with the New Testament, where Jesus talks about grace and reconciliation?" Undaunted, Father Farley then refers to Romans 13, in which the Apostle Paul emphasises that governmental powers were ordained by God and are therefore not to be challenged. Prejean does so regardless. At another point, she debates the issue briefly with a penal official and, when he voices the threadbare "eye for an eye" rationale, she counters with a

reductio ad absurdum argument by recalling that the Old Testament also called for death as a fitting punishment for homosexuality, contempt of parents, profaning the Sabbath, and other infractions of the Law.

There is no indication that Prejean really considers abandoning hope on behalf of Poncelet. That his overall recalcitrance and only half-hearted acceptance of his guilt in one scene after another cause frustration is evident, although Prejean never appears notably discouraged. The breakthrough does not occur until their final conversation, only hours before his execution, when he has accepted the inevitability of imminent death. Even then Poncelet briefly blames his accomplice in the murders, but when Prejean presses the matter, he sobbingly confesses that he shot Walter Delacroix and raped Hope Percy. Prejean regards this as an epiphany and, in her view, is the moment of salvation for the condemned man. She assures him that he is now a "son of God" who finally has gained "dignity". Reversing his earlier stance of vengefulness, Poncelet tells her that he hopes his death will finally give the parents in question long-awaited peace.

The place of Christianity in this confession and acceptance of guilt preceding forgiveness is graphically illustrated in the chamber where Poncelet is put to death. His heavily tattooed body features at least two swastikas, graphically symbolising his violently sinful nature. Yet after Poncelet is strapped horizontally to a gurney and an intravenous needle is inserted into his right elbow, he is shown in a vertical position with his arms partially extended to his sides. The similarity of this pose to that on a crucifix is equally unmistakable. It is while in this posture and with some measure of peace on his face that Poncelet briefly addresses Mr. Delacroix and the Percys and asks for their forgiveness. He also declares his conviction that all killing is wrong, whether by an individual or the state. Poncelet is then returned to a horizontal position, and the lethal drugs are shown flowing through plastic tubes into his body. That he has received God's grace and through Prejean's ministry seen the ultimate power of divine love seems beyond dispute. The unanswered question after the execution has taken place is whether the same can be said of the parents of the murdered teenagers.

5. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CINEMA

Having juxtaposed the principal themes of Robbins's script and Prejean's book, we can draw tentative conclusions about the effectiveness of the film *Dead Man Walking* as a vehicle for communicating what these two authors sought to convey through their respective media. The internationally known missiologist and theologian, Professor J N J Kritzinger of the University of South Africa has lauded this cinematic work as potentially one of the most useful means of propagating the Gospel to appear during the 1990s. He believes that in reaching vast numbers of viewers on an international scale its value surpasses that of a vast amount of printed material in an age when the impact on the masses of evangelistic tracts and other verbal vehicles of the Christian message of salvation has been called into question.¹² The usefulness of *Dead Man Walking* as an argument against capital punishment, however, is arguably quite limited. To be sure, the film highlights poignantly the emotional agony of life on death row, and Robbins, like Prejean, underscores the ineffectiveness of vengeance as a means of coping with parental grief. The political reasons for maintaining the death penalty emerge vividly, and few viewers can remain ignorant of the rôle of poverty in the distribution of the death penalty. On the other hand, most of what have long been the central arguments against capital punishment are poorly developed in *Dead Man Walking*. Hilton Barbour scores a few points in his speech to the Pardon Board, but even his statements there, however relevant though they may be to the larger debate, are little more than unsubstantiated assertions. A film of this sort is, generally speaking, a difficult forum in which to adduce statistical or other objective evidence concerning an issue of this magnitude without alienating much of audiences whose patience may not be sufficient to tolerate such discourse. To be sure, one can find exceptions in the filmscripts of a craftsman like Robert Bolt, whose *A Man for All Seasons*, to cite an arguably extreme example, proved captivating to viewers on an international basis during the 1960s. Generally speaking, however, screenplays rarely allow for such detailed discussion. When much of the primary thrust

12 Interview with Professor J N J Kritzinger, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 27 January 1997.

must be in the form of visual imagery, such verbal and rhetorical finesse is generally sacrificed. In this respect, *Dead Man Walking* is no exception.

The staying power of this film may, therefore, lie chiefly in its representation of the ministry of Sister Helen Prejean, though this is obviously intertwined with her - and Robbins' - campaign against capital punishment. In this case, the screen proves its worth as a means of communicating the power of the Gospel. At times the dialogue between Prejean and Poncelet is relatively sparse, while in other confrontations between these two powerful characters it becomes profuse, especially after Prejean gains confidence in her calling as a spiritual counsellor. When combined with the adequate to rich imagery of their intramural encounters, which embody a showdown between abiding evil and abrogation of moral accountability on Poncelet's side and the Gospel of salvation through confession of sin and repentance on that of Prejean, the result is a striking and profound testimony to the ultimate victory of Christianity.

Herein may lie the greatest relevance of *Dead Man Walking* for South Africa on the threshold of the third millennium, notwithstanding the truncated nature of this film's ethical argumentation. Eminent legal scholars have argued cogently that the death penalty cannot be revived in this country without fundamental changes in the constitution (Van Rooyen and Coetzee 1996), a position hauntingly reminiscent of what was once contended in the United States of America. But the multidimensional film in question is no less about the social, political, and legal ramifications of capital punishment than about the timeless Christian message of forgiveness and reconciliation as a *conditio sine quo non* for sound living in a world where suffering and injustice are inevitably components of life. This focus on breaking out of the *circulosus vitiosus* of an eye for an eye remains particularly relevant to a violence-ridden society. Laws, constitutions, forms of punishment, and social and other conditions breeding crime can shift like the Saharan sands. *Verbum autem Domini manet in aeternum.*

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