

Death penalty supporters and theology

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Earlier this week, a jury recommended that Steven Hayes--convicted of the brutal murder of Jennifer Hawke-Petit and her daughters Hayley and Michaela Petit--be put to death. CNN ran an intimate interview with a couple of the jurors, an interview Mollie Hemingway rightly [praises](#) for not shying away from its subjects' faith.

Some of the quotes, however, beg for theological responses. Here's juror Paula Calzetta, from the online [write-up](#) of the TV interview:

"I thought that this would be the only opportunity for this man to ever make peace with his Supreme Being, if he even has one," or to accept responsibility, Calzetta said. She felt the death penalty was necessary for Hayes to accept responsibility or experience remorse.

I'm struck by Calzetta's suggestion that for some people, peace with God requires death. This implies that Hayes is beyond redemption in this world--while it's important for him to be remorseful, this is for others' good only, not his own.

At another point, juror Maico Cardona explains why a life sentence wasn't sufficient:

"I knew that [on death row] he would be in a cell by himself, secluded ... that's what he hated." If jurors had recommended Hayes be sentenced to life without the possibility of parole, "he would have been in general population," Cardona said. "That's what he liked. That's what he was used to."

Here the death sentence's purpose seems to be providing discomfort for Hayes *in life*, somehow separate from the fact that the state will at some point end this life.

Hemingway also highlights a different [news story](#) on the decision, in which Hawke-Petit's father, a pastor, is quoted:

"We really felt like we were between a rock and a hard place, for we value life so much," the retired reverend [told Harry Smith of the Early Show]. "But we have come to realize that there are some people who just do not deserve to live in God's world, and we feel that Steven was one of those."

Earthly life has great value, according to this reasoning, but not absolute value--if your crimes are heinous enough, your life's value goes away.

When death penalty proponents appeal to the need to make sure a killer can't kill again or to deter others, the debate unfolds in terms of sociology and public policy. But the arguments presented in these interviews point to troubling *theological* ideas. How do we respond in a way that takes seriously the unthinkable suffering Hayes has caused but also insists that concepts like grace, redemption and human dignity don't mean much if they're not powerful enough to apply to everyone?

Also this week, the U.N. Human Rights Council [conducted](#) its first-ever comprehensive review of the U.S.'s record on human rights. The review included repeated calls for the U.S. to stop executing criminals, which State Department legal adviser Harold Hongju Koh rebuffed. While 139 countries have abolished the death penalty, ours shows few signs of joining them.