

The elusive nature of evil: Part three

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In the spring of 2004, the serial killer known as BTK shocked experts around the world by reappearing after what were thought to be 20 years of dormancy. Because serial killers are almost always unable to stop killing once they start, it was assumed that BTK was either dead or in prison.

As it turns out, he had apparently gotten too old for the physical rigors of murder. He was married, and was gainfully employed, living in a suburb near Wichita, and the president of his church council.

Many crimes are understandable to the average person. We understand that someone who wants a computer might steal one. We understand that a man might cheat on his taxes or embezzle from his company because he wants money. We can even understand, somewhat, how an exhausted and inexperienced single parent might become enraged and violently shake her child.

But we confront the limits of our understanding when we consider a man like Dennis Rader. We only know that his crimes were horrific. We do not understand how a man can become sexually aroused by the death throes of an 11-year-old girl. We don't know the nature of his condition or how he came to be this way, but any reasonable person will agree that something is not right inside him. It is the reality of this kind of human brokenness that gives rise to two paradoxes, the first social and the second theological.

The first paradox is that the more horrific the crimes of a killer, the angrier and more punitive we become as a society. When a serial killer is caught, novels are written about him. The details of his crime—often with pictures—are published in every newspaper and on the Internet. Our collective anger grows until it boils over. We talk of tough punishments around the water cooler at work. We say that no fate is too horrible for a monster like this. If the death penalty is available, we push for it, and it is granted. After some years, we put the killer to death in a public spectacle that attracts the same levels of news coverage and attention. Everyone sighs in relief.

That's one killer who won't kill again.

In Dennis Rader's case, he was convicted of multiple murders, and he had bound and tortured his victims. The death penalty was not applicable in his state, so he was sentenced to life without parole in a maximum security prison. There he spends 23 hours a day in a tiny cell, isolated from all human contact. Isolation in a maximum security prison is torture enough for any human. And yet this punishment was not enough for the district attorney's office. After he was convicted, sentenced, and incarcerated, they made several legal appeals to have all reading materials banned from his cell as well.

It is not enough that he sit alone in a cell for the next 30 years. They want him to sit in his cell with nothing to read.

The irony is obvious: the more horrible and unimaginable the crime, the more convinced we are that something is seriously wrong with the person who committed it. In these cases, one would think that our desire for vengeance would be lessened by that fact. It is not. Our desire for revenge in these cases is very primitive. We are villagers sacrificing a person to appease an angry, evil god that we ourselves do not understand, but fear greatly.

Another paradox is theological in nature. The most conservative Christians, the ones most convinced of a literal hell where eternal flames will lick at the damned for all eternity, are often the ones who demand the death penalty for violent killers. And they do this believing that these men will be tortured in hell for all eternity.

This kind of vengeful rage is completely contrary to the Spirit of Christ. It would seem to any reasonable person that conservative Christians would be the ones most against the death penalty and most passionate about keeping these men alive. After all, if a man is alive, he might yet be saved.

In the face of these paradoxes, I'd like suggest appropriate social and theological responses to serial killers and other violent criminals who put society at risk.

First, until we can confidently claim to understand what causes a person to become a psychopathic killer, we have no business putting them to death or subjecting them to punitive punishments. They must be incarcerated for our protection, but while they are in prison they should be given access to whatever levels of therapeutic help are available to them.

If there is any possibility that psychopathology has a genetic or biological component, we owe these unfortunate individuals the dignity of limiting their punishment to simple incarceration and not subjecting them to further, punitive punishments. It's not going to hurt anyone to allow Dennis Rader to read a few magazines or even watch an occasional television show. No one will find peace in knowing that he is deprived of these things.

Second, we Christians should not be advocates for the death penalty, if only because of our belief in the possibility of redemption. These men are not beyond redemption. Our society has no cure for them, or any answers for how they became psychopaths. And yet the simple message of the gospel continues to be a healing agent. David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam killer, became a Christian in prison. While the very conservative Christian message that finally reached him might be seen as unsophisticated and simplistic by many, there is no arguing the fact that the gospel word did reach him. And whatever his capacity for receiving the message of Christ, he received it, as we all do, with the best understanding he had.

Ironically, conservative Christians who called for his death also had the gospel language that finally reached him and spoke to his heart.

[The Elusive Nature of Evil - Part One](#)

[The Elusive Nature of Evil - Part Two](#)