

Hangman's knot: No space for repentance and reconciliation

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Killing people is a grisly business, even in the case of capital punishment. In Florida last year executioners found Angel Nieves Diaz still moving 24 minutes after the first administration of lethal drugs. They had mistakenly injected the drugs into the soft tissue of his arm instead of into a blood vessel. It took a second dose and a total of 34 minutes for him to be declared dead—at least twice the time normally needed. Opponents of the death penalty have long argued that lethal injection is more painful than its advocates claim and than most people realize. Since those being executed are sedated before the lethal drug is administered, they are unable to cry out.

In Iraq, Saddam Hussein's death was widely commented on for its indignity. His executioners taunted him before he died, and a cell-phone video of the hanging was quickly broadcast worldwide. A handful of children around the world responded to the global fascination by hanging themselves.

The more recent execution of Saddam's half-brother, Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, who was head of the secret police under Saddam, was apparently more dignified and was not filmed, but it was also gruesomely botched: Ibrahim was accidentally beheaded by the hanging. The *Chicago Tribune* quoted Omar Abdul-Sattar, a member of Iraq's parliament: "It's really rare. . . . I am a doctor and I would not believe such a thing could happen unless the rope is too short or the defendant weighs 400 or 500 pounds." The ripping off of a man's head makes one long for a return to the more humane guillotine.

Critics of the critics of these executions may say that these men's victims were given no more dignity at their deaths. But that is beside the point. When a state takes upon itself the role of executing the guilty, it must at least do so in a way that approximates the justice denied to the victims. Otherwise it is acting little better than an armed mob.

After Diaz's death, Florida governor Jeb Bush suspended executions in that state and appointed a panel to look into the state's manner of execution to see if it constitutes cruel and unusual punishment.

Even if done "professionally," capital punishment takes away space for repentance and future reconciliation. In Iraq, the execution took away some of the principal witnesses to history before the full record of their affairs could be known. For Christians, state executions always bear an uncomfortable resemblance to the founding event of our faith—the execution of Jesus. That execution was designed to bring about pain and humiliation. Generally that is not now a goal of capital punishment, but it is often an accidental result, which is another reason to work toward abolition of the death penalty.