As the opening pages of this work assert, the past decades have witnessed unprecedented efforts worldwide to abolish capital punishment, and the Roman Catholic Church has emerged as a leading proponent of this movement. In the light of such events, E. Christian Brugger presents this stimulating study of current Roman Catholic teaching on the subject as well as its setting in historical context. As the book’s title may suggest, this work is primarily a Roman Catholic insider study of the issue. Its primary usefulness will be for Roman Catholics who are attempting to understand their own tradition on capital punishment and for others wishing to gain insight into a tradition not their own. Despite some interaction with non-Catholic sources, there is little explicit exploration of how contemporary Roman Catholic teaching does, or might, enter into dialogue with those in other theological or philosophical traditions on this issue of obviously broad concern. As it stands, then, this work is more an internal Roman Catholic conversation than a Roman Catholic conversation with others (this comment is not meant as criticism, however, because the author does not promise otherwise).

Despite its modest length, Brugger ambitiously attempts to accomplish several different purposes: he explains and interprets current Roman Catholic teaching on capital punishment, defends the justification of punishment generally in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, traces the history of thought on capital punishment in Christian theology from the patristic era to the present, discusses contemporary Roman Catholic teaching in the light of ideas such as infallible magisterial authority and the development of doctrine, and expounds a “systematic and philosophically consistent account of the new posi-
tion.” Because of these multiple goals, it is difficult to summarize briefly the main case that Brugger wishes to make. Perhaps above all, however, Brugger presents an unconventional interpretation of contemporary magisterial teaching and defends this teaching as so interpreted as a legitimate development of Catholic doctrine. The key move that Brugger makes in regard to the former is arguing that the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* shifts Roman Catholic discussion of the death penalty from the context of legitimate punishment to the context of self-defense (of society) as defined by the principle of “double effect.” In other words, the *Catechism* deliberately reconceives the legitimacy of capital punishment in terms of the state’s authority to defend life against the unjust aggressor rather than in terms of redressing the disorder in society caused by grave crime. Following this argument early in the work, Brugger’s extensive survey of past Christian teaching on capital punishment serves (besides being a very useful general reference) as background for the primary concern of the last section of the book, in which he defends this reconceived position as a legitimate development of Catholic doctrine.

From a Protestant standpoint, one of the most intriguing features of this work is the effort that it must make in order to reconcile its moral theology with its ecclesiology. Brugger does not dispute the fact that the overwhelming consensus of theologians, bishops, and popes through as late as the 1960s upheld and at times vigorously defended capital punishment as part of the legitimate authority of the civil magistrate. How can the Roman Catholic Church propagate its current opposition to the death penalty in the light of its claims about its own teaching authority? Because capital punishment is a prominent example of an area in which Roman Catholic doctrine has changed quite dramatically, this book may serve as an interesting case study of how ideas such as magisterial infallibility and the development of doctrine are worked out concretely. Although it is probably best to leave to Roman Catholics an evaluation of how well Brugger’s analysis satisfies Catholicism’s own criteria for infallibility and development, non-Catholics may find the whole process rather tortuous. A framework that allows such drastic change in a matter of two decades to be labeled (euphemistically?) development evokes a strong sense of skepticism.

In regard to the rationales for and against capital punishment, Brugger’s defense of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*’s decision to treat capital punishment in terms of self-defense rather than retribution seems in need of more thorough argument. The conviction among so many Christian theologians historically, as well as ordinary people in places such as the United States today, that the death penalty is an inherently just punishment for certain heinous crimes is too stubborn not to be considered of great weight. One of the biblical texts often cited in support of capital punishment, Genesis 9:6, also suggests its inherent justice. Brugger spends surprisingly little space discussing Genesis 9:6, though at one point he claims that the death and resurrection of Christ has effected a change in the moral order that abrogates the need for spilling blood for the punishment of crime. From a Reformed theological standpoint, the
apparent establishment in Genesis 9:6 of an order of common grace that will endure as long as the present earth itself calls into question such a quick dismissal of the contemporary relevance of this passage. Furthermore, its appeal back to the creation order by means of the image-of-God motif makes humanity’s strong sense of the inherent justice of the death penalty all the more credible.

—David Van Drunen