

Kansas jury convicts murderer of abortion doctor George Tiller

A reporter
5 February 2010

A Wichita, Kansas jury took only 37 minutes to find an antiabortion fanatic guilty of murder in the execution-style shooting of Dr. George Tiller, who operated one of a handful of clinics in the United States that performs late-term abortions. The verdict was handed down January 29 after a one-week trial.

Scott Roeder, 51, faces a mandatory sentence of life in prison with the possibility of parole after 25 years. He was the only defense witness, testifying at length about his efforts to destroy Dr. Tiller and his clinic, over a ten-year period, and attempting to justify the killing on the basis of his religion-based hostility to abortion.

Roeder's testimony gave a chilling view of the mentality of the antiabortion fanatic. He recounted how he had come to his intense opposition to abortion after a 1992 religious conversion prompted by Pat Robertson's 700 Club television program. He also befriended a woman who went to prison for shooting Dr. Tiller in the arms in 1993. The doctor survived that assault and continued his practice caring for women, many of whose fetuses had severe genetic abnormalities discovered late in their pregnancies.

According to Roeder, he had considered various methods of stopping Dr. Tiller, including cutting off his hands, but concluded that even a maimed doctor could instruct others, and therefore killing was the only solution. He decided to kill Tiller in his church because the doctor, otherwise very careful about security, was vulnerable there.

Roeder visited the church at least twice, carrying a concealed .22 pistol, but on occasions when Tiller was away. On May 31, 2009, on his third visit, he found Tiller, walked up to him, placed the gun against his forehead and pulled the trigger.

The killer revealed that he had attended parts of the

trial in March 2009, when Tiller was acquitted by another Wichita jury, deliberating for less than 30 minutes, on trumped-up charges that he had violated provisions of the Kansas law regulating abortion providers.

Former Kansas Attorney General Phill Kline—defeated for reelection in a campaign in which his obsessive efforts to persecute Dr. Tiller were a major issue—brought charges against the abortion provider after becoming a local prosecutor in Wichita. The indictment of Dr. Tiller on 19 misdemeanor counts, largely relating to alleged paperwork errors, led to a well-publicized trial and an emphatic decision by a jury.

Roeder said that he had lost faith in the judicial system after that verdict and had decided to go ahead with the assassination, which he conceded, on cross-examination, that he had been contemplating since 1993.

Antiabortion activists attended the trial, in a demonstration of their moral support for the murderer. Judge Warren Wilbert initially conciliated these right-wing elements by declaring that, while he would not permit Roeder's attorneys to offer a defense of justification, he would consider permitting the jury to bring a verdict of voluntary manslaughter. He did, however, bar the defense from calling Kline and other antiabortion activists and politicians as witnesses, since this would have effectively put Dr. Tiller, and not his killer, on trial.

Moreover, after Roeder's brutal testimony, the judge ruled that the jury could only consider two verdicts: first degree, premeditated murder, or acquittal. He said that Roeder's lawyers had failed to show that Tiller posed an "imminent threat" to human life—the legal requirement for a manslaughter verdict—since he was in

church, not at his clinic, and since abortion is legal in Kansas. He also rejected a possible verdict of second degree murder, since the killing was clearly premeditated.

In their closing arguments, Roeder's attorneys in effect asked the jury to ignore the judge's rulings and consider a defense of justification, presenting the murderer as an activist on behalf of the "unborn" and comparing him to Martin Luther King Jr. Outside the courtroom, representatives of various ultra-right groups sought to smear Dr. Tiller as a mass murderer of the "unborn" whose killer should be celebrated rather than condemned.

Dr. Tiller's widow Jeanne issued a statement praising the jury for "a just verdict." The Tiller family said it wanted him to be "remembered for his legacy of service to women, the help he provided for those who needed it and the love and happiness he provided us as a husband, father and grandfather."

The 67-year-old doctor spent more than a quarter century maintaining his clinic, Women's Health Care Services, in the face of increasingly violent right-wing attacks. His clinic was firebombed in 1986 and blockaded throughout the summer of 1991. Tiller was shot in 1993, but returned to work the next day. In 2002, the antiabortion group Operation Rescue moved its headquarters to Wichita and declared that its major goal was to put Dr. Tiller out of business.

Dr. Tiller was the fourth doctor and eighth person to be murdered by antiabortion extremists since 1993. While Scott Roeder pulled the trigger and will go to prison, the moral authors of his crime—religious hucksters like Pat Robertson, right-wing politicians and so-called "activists" like Operation Rescue founder Randall Terry and its current leader Troy Newman—go unpunished.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact