

Out of Horror, Hope:
A Biblically Based Study of Torture's Ravages and
Potential Responses in the Reformed Tradition
from the
No2Torture Group (studyguide@No2Torture.org)

Second Session:

Do We Live to Ourselves? Do We Die to Ourselves?

HANDOUTS

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1. *Torture Fatigue* by Silja J.A. Talvi (for Exercise 4, optional)
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3. *The Confession of 1967* (9.45) and *The Theological Declaration of Barmen* (8.04)

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Torture Fatigue

By Silja J.A. Talvi

June 28, 2005

"The Christian in me says it's wrong," Army Specialist Charles A. Graner, Jr. said of torturing prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. "But the corrections officer in me says I love to make a grown man piss himself."

Photos taken of him demeaning captives at Abu Ghraib exposed Graner as the sadist that his surroundings allowed him to be. But are the differences between brutal correctional officers like Graner and other Americans as stark as we would like to think?

An acquaintance of mine recently admitted how much he enjoyed watching the torture scenes in the new blockbuster, *Sin City*. "I know it's strange," he said, "but there's something I get out of seeing torture and violence like that on the screen. It's like it's some kind of release."

He is not alone. Slate's David Edelstein enthused that the film boasted "the most relentless display of torture and sadism I've encountered in a mainstream movie. My reaction to *Sin City* is easily stated. I loved it. Or, to put it another way, I loved it, I loved it, I loved it. I loved every gorgeous sick disgusting ravishing overbaked blood-spurting artificial frame of it. ... It seems pointless to tut-tut over the depravity. *Sin City* is like a must-have coffee-table book for your interior torture chamber."

That interior torture chamber is more visible in popular culture than ever before. One of the nation's most popular network television shows, "24," opened its season finale with an over-the-top torture scene of a man, forcibly strapped down to a chair, being shocked repeatedly with volts of electricity, screaming and crying out in sheer agony. The scene was so attention-grabbing that it ended up being featured as one of the week's top events on VH1's "Best Week Ever." Torture pops up everywhere these days, even on the latest T-Mobile commercial, which features a young, black man tied down to a chair, screaming in an interrogation-style room as he's tortured by having his phone bill run up. At the end of the commercial, a smiling Catherine Zeta-Jones delivers her pitch as he stumbles around the store, still bound to the chair.

What accounts for the prevalence and popularity of these scenes of torture and misery? Could these media images be serving as a form of misplaced cathartic release to ease our social conscience, a bizarre way of processing and desensitizing ourselves to real-life torture?

Consider that only one-third of Americans questioned in a Washington Post-ABC News poll last May defined what happened at Abu Ghraib as "torture." Half of those polled believed that such acts of brutality were taking place as a matter of policy in the "war on terrorism."

Our legislators are no better in this regard. With the notable exception of individuals like Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), congressional vows to find out who was responsible for the Abu Ghraib scandal ebbed after the prosecution of a few low-level ranking officers, a few fines and the issuance of a single demotion.

In an exhaustive May 2005 Amnesty International report, "Guantánamo and beyond: the continuing pursuit of unchecked executive power," the running count of detentions in the global war on terror stands, at least, at 70,000 people, including the known deaths of 27 individuals in U.S. custody since 2002. To take but one example, consider this June 2004 account of Martin Mubanga, a British citizen who was kidnapped by U.S. Forces in Zambia and eventually brought to Guantánamo:

I needed the toilet and I asked the interrogator to let me go. But he just said "you'll go when I say so." I told him he had five minutes to get me to the toilet or I was going to go on the floor. He left the room. Finally, I squirmed across the floor and did it in the corner, trying to minimize the mess ... He comes back with a mop and dips it in the pool of urine. Then he starts covering me with my own waste, like he's using a big paint-brush, working methodically, beginning with my feet and ankles, and working his way up my legs. All the while, he's racially abusing me, cussing me: "Oh, the poor little negro, the poor little #####." He seemed to think it was funny.

What such systemic brutality means, on some level, is that Americans bear collective responsibility for the damage our government has done. That's not an easy thing to contemplate. But the public won't find any such admission represented on the pages of our commercial newspapers and magazines. Instead we see outrage and compassion about things that we're not responsible for, the deaths of Terri Schiavo and the Pope, for instance, or the toll of the tsunami.

At the recent National Conference for Media Reform, author Naomi Klein spoke of these media-managed, "ritualized, collective mourning moments" that serve as "compassion release valves."

"We have moments where all that pent up compassion is allowed to release, and you are allowed to care [and have] spasms of outrage and compassion," Klein said.

Such large-scale, media-frenzied, compassion-release-valve mechanisms are important, she added, because "the feeling of being outraged alone is the feeling of being crazy."

Could it be that Americans are subconsciously trying to stay sane by desensitizing themselves and finding cathartic release in endless media depictions of torture and brutality? The U.S. military death toll now nears 2,000 men and women, in addition to the countless thousands of Iraqis and Afghans who have died. Who among us truly wants to face the emotional impact of what we've done?

I asked clinical psychologist Bruce Levine, the author of *Commonsense Rebellion*, what he thought of all of this. "When you become disconnected from your own alienation [from society], you become cut off from your humanity," he told me. "You become numb to all kinds of atrocities."

A crucial mechanism of that numbing process where real-life torture is concerned seems to revolve around the ability to release primal reactions (terror, fear and outrage, for instance) in both a socially condoned and politically non-threatening way. Gorging on the barrage of fictionalized torture imagery has become the easiest and most accessible way for American citizens to do this with the least possible discomfort. Whether consciously or subconsciously, the writers and producers of torture-saturated media play a crucial role in this process, feeding and fueling this perverse and deeply rooted pathology.

These media-produced, sanitized bloodsports have become a thick bandage affixed over the deep and ugly gash of human suffering and cruelty. But that bandage can only stay in place for so long before it begins to rot away.

Real healing and emotional catharsis would actually require genuine discomfort, discourse and reparation. It would necessitate an admission of our collective culpability for the emotional and physical damage inflicted by our government, whether on the streets of Baghdad, or in the interrogation rooms of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay.

Without such reflection, we're headed for our own true-to-life Sin City, a veritable carnival of bloodsport, torture and misery for all.

Silja J.A. Talvi, an award-winning journalist, is currently writing a book about women in prison.

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It's Time to Say No to Torture (Part 1)

by Doug King

[6-6-05]

Back in December, during an earlier round of revelations about the US use of torture at Guantánamo and various other places of detention, the Rev. Bruce Gillette sent this note:

In the name of Jesus Christ Almighty, why are people representing *our* government, paid by us, writing filth on the Korans of helpless prisoners? Is this American? Is it Christian? What are our moral values? Where are the [clergy] on this?

He referred to a column by Molly Ivins, published on December 5, 2004, which you can read on the Common Dreams website (<http://www.commondreams.org/views04/1205-01.htm>).

A member of the church I attend, St. Luke Presbyterian in Wayzata, MN, is able to speak about this from first-hand experience. Born in El Salvador in 1958, René joined the Salvadoran military as a paratrooper in 1974, and two years later joined the Treasury Police. This was in the beginning of the political unrest in which the US military became heavily involved in El Salvador, working with the Salvadoran military and para-military groups to resist the efforts of the people who were engaged in a fight for greater political freedom and economic justice in their land.

René explained how he witnessed the use of torture to get information from detainees. Choking back tears, he recalls talking with one prisoner, a former professor, who was locked away and ignored, left with almost no food or water, reduced to nothing but skin covering his bones.

The torturers had been trained by U.S. agents in psychological interrogation techniques. He and his fellow soldiers had been convinced that Marxists were the enemy, and that any action to defeat them was justified.

Through this experience he learned that "torture is a weapon of mass terror," aimed at subduing people, not at gaining information. Under torture a person will say anything to satisfy the torturer – but then, getting information isn't the only goal. He learned too that

once people have been subjected to torture they are rarely released, for they will tell what has happened to them. And that cannot be allowed to happen. (Though as we are witnessing again today, it does happen. The truth sometimes *does* get out.)

René says he can't sleep these days, because "a lot of the things that are happening now are the things that were happening then" in El Salvador, against the Marxists, "the enemy."

What makes it worse, he says, is that the American people know what's going on, and they apparently won't protest. "Beware when you fight with monsters," he warns, "not to become a monster yourself. And we have become monsters."

We know that torture is happening, he says, "but nothing happens" in protest. "This," he adds, "is what happened in Germany."

Source: *Book of Confessions*
<http://www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/boc.pdf>

The Confession of 1967 (9.45)

Part II

THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

4. RECONCILIATION IN SOCIETY

b. God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ is the ground of the peace, justice, and freedom among nations which all powers of government are called to serve and defend. The church, in its own life, is called to practice the forgiveness of enemies and to commend to the nations as practical politics the search for cooperation and peace. This search requires that the nations pursue fresh and responsible relations across every line of conflict, even at risk to national security, to reduce areas of strife and to broaden international understanding. Reconciliation among nations becomes peculiarly urgent as countries develop nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, diverting their manpower and resources from constructive uses and risking the annihilation of mankind. Although nations may serve God's purposes in history, the church which identifies the sovereignty of any one nation or any one way of life with the cause of God denies the Lordship of Christ and betrays its calling.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen (8.04)

I. An Appeal to the Evangelical Congregations and Christians in Germany

Try the spirits whether they are of God! Prove also the words of the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church to see whether they agree with Holy Scripture and with the Confessions of the Fathers. If you find that we are speaking contrary to Scripture, then do not listen to us! But if you find that we are taking our stand upon Scripture, then let no fear or temptation keep you from treading with us the path of faith and obedience to the Word of God, in order that God's people be of one mind upon earth and that we in faith experience what he himself has said: "I will never leave you, nor forsake you." Therefore, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."