



By William T. Cavanaugh

Threat of Torture Plays with More Minds than You Might Have Imagined

Why would the president make “secret” prisons public? Why would George W. Bush assure us that “The United States does not torture,” while in effect contending that we must? Granted, Bush does not use the word “torture” when arguing for the necessity of the “alternative set of procedures” used by the CIA in its secret prisons, but “torture” is what the U.S. has customarily called “waterboarding” when done by other countries. Why the simultaneous affirmations and denials?

Torture is not only, or even primarily, about the capture of information. Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence John Kimmons has said, “I am absolutely convinced [that] no good intelligence is going to come from abusive practices. I think the empirical evidence of the last five years, hard years, tells us that.” The official government report on Abu Ghraib said that the mistreatment there was not “even directed at intelligence targets.”

So what is torture for? Torture has a formative effect on the collective imagination of a society. It is, in the strict sense, a taboo. Its name must not be spoken, but its presence must be widely known, because it generates a special kind of collective imagination about us and about our enemies. Torture does not merely respond to enemies; it helps make them.

Knowing that there are secret prisons using “alternative procedures” is an important part of the political theater surrounding the “war on terrorism.” Torture helps reinforce our imagination of enemies so diabolical that only extreme measures can force them to tell the truth. We need to know that our government is using every conceivable resource to keep us safe from such enemies. The extremity of the act of torture cuts off our natural human sympathy and reinforces the distinction between us and them. Torture tells us about them: the procedure is so extreme that they must have done something to deserve it. As the Abu Ghraib photos illustrate, torture reduces them to what they are in our imagination: depraved sub-humans. Torture also tells us about us: we are willing to go to heroic lengths to save the world from evil. The threat must be terribly severe if we are forced to use such extreme measures; torture is therefore invested with the

highest moral seriousness. Only the most righteous nation on earth could be trusted to use torture for good.

President Bush’s affirmations and denials of torture help reinforce a social imagination often called American exceptionalism. On one hand, we believe that we do not torture; America is the one nation that has always stood for freedom and righteousness throughout the world. On the other hand, we believe that, because of our unique position as bearers of freedom, we have been singled out by a terrible enemy. Our hands must not be tied in dealing with such a threat. America is the one nation that can be trusted to use an “alternative set of procedures” for good.

These two convictions about torture—that we don’t and that we must—are two sides of the same American exceptionalism. John McCain wrote that, when he was tortured in Vietnam, he was comforted by the thought that America would never treat its enemies that way. However, as Alfred McCoy’s book *A Question of Torture* documents, the U.S. has a history of direct and indirect involvement in torture in Vietnam, the Middle East, Latin America and elsewhere.

How should the followers of a crucified God respond? What does the fact that Jesus Christ was tortured to death tell us about the way we imagine enemies? According to Paul, what the cross does is to overcome the friend/enemy distinction. “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life” (*Romans 5:8, 10*). We are God’s enemies; we tortured Christ to death.

We can no longer think ourselves righteous, as the exceptional people who are without sin. While fully recognizing the evils of terrorism, we cannot ignore our own history of terror. We can no longer answer the question “Why do they hate us?” with comforting lies like “They hate our freedoms.” Fortunately, Christ revealed the truth by taking the place of the victims of this world’s violence. We are called to follow Christ by doing the same, by unforgetting the victims of this world, both “ours” and “theirs.” ◀

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