

National Religious Campaign Against Torture

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://archive.jsonline.com/news/opinion/release-the-torture-report-b99138295z1-231182221.html/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

By Michael A. Schuler

As a religious leader, I am all too familiar with the sordid history of torture. According to the Gospels, Jesus of Nazareth was brutally scourged by the Romans before being subjected to the most agonizing and ignominious of deaths. This appalling story notwithstanding, during the late Middle Ages, countless men and women branded by Christ's church as heretics were tortured until they recanted and sought forgiveness. One of the forerunners of my own faith tradition, Michael Servetus, was imprisoned, tortured and ultimately burned at the stake in John Calvin's, Geneva for the crime of denying the Trinity.

Today, we look back on the actions of our forebears with dismay and regret. Yet the persecution of religious deviants was justified at the time as a practical means to save their immortal souls and deter them from spreading their dangerous doctrines.

One would hope that as our sensitivity to human suffering has increased, such tactics would no longer be tolerated. Unfortunately, torture is still being employed right here in our nation. Ironically, we have criticized others for violating human rights.

According to an August 2002 Justice Department memo, the president, acting as commander in chief, could authorize torture without fear of criminal liability. The executive was also granted tremendous leeway with respect to the kind and severity of the torture that could be inflicted.

Since then, horrific stories have emerged about the use of waterboarding, extended sleep deprivation, sexual humiliation and prolonged solitary confinement at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and hidden "black box" sites. In tragic instances, prisoners have been literally tortured to death.

These measures were intended to extract information from individuals thought to have ties to terrorist organizations. Military intelligence experts closely involved with the Guantanamo interrogations, however, have conceded that such torture produced little, if any, information of value. In fact, 15 former U.S. interrogators and intelligence officials declared in 2008 that torture is an "unlawful, ineffective and counterproductive" way to gather intelligence.

Earlier this year, a bipartisan, non-governmental task force convened by The Constitution Project completed a two-year investigation into the treatment of 9-11 detainees, concluding that our government including officials at the highest levels of leadership indisputably authorized illegal torture.

As Georgetown University law professor David Cole has suggested, "In the long run, the best insurance against cruelty and torture becoming U.S. policy again is a formal recognition that what we did after September 11 was wrong as a normative, moral, and legal matter, not just as a tactical issue."

Unitarian Universalists have been actively concerned about this practice for more than half a decade. In 2007, the annual General Assembly of Unitarian Universalist congregations issued a "Religious Call to Action" for the purpose of ending the torture of U.S. military detainees. That resolution categorically rejected the use of torture "by anyone, for any purpose, under any circumstances" and called for "compliance with the Geneva Conventions and the UN Convention against torture."

Two of Unitarian Universalism's Seven Principles inform this resolution. One calls upon us to "affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person," and the second to work for "justice, equity and compassion in human relations."

Ours, however, is but one of many faith traditions that have gone on record opposing torture. We join with the hundreds of diverse religious and faith-based organizations coming together through the National Religious Campaign Against Torture and over a million church members representing 13 denominations through the Wisconsin Council of Churches, in calling for the Senate Intelligence Committee to release its own report on torture.

That report is critical in ensuring the public understands what was committed in its name, in making our government accountable for wrongdoing, and most importantly, in moving forward on moral ground that is based on transparency and honesty. We have a shameful past, but we must answer for it, not ignore it. By keeping this report that was approved by the committee almost a year ago in December 2012 hidden from public view, Americans remain in the dark.

Both President Barack Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder have voiced deep concerns about state-sanctioned torture and rejected its use as an intelligence tool. Nevertheless, full disclosure of and accountability for past offenses has not been forthcoming. As people of faith, we must make our voices heard, lest torture become the rule rather than the exception in our country's strategic calculations.

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