

Torture - the crucial challenge for Christians

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It's been a privilege over more than 30 years to have had some dealings with men and women who've been tortured. I've met them or their families in South Africa, in El Salvador, in Russia, in Egypt, and from many other countries in exile here. For many years, whenever I spoke of torture, people would say, in effect, 'What's the fuss? It surely doesn't happen any more.' Now everyone has heard of Guantanamo Bay, of Abu Ghraib, of British collusion in contemporary torture. No one can plead ignorance now - torture is used routinely in some 100 countries.

The challenge of torture in today's world is a crucial one (crucial - from *crux*, cross, reminding us that Jesus was tortured to death). It is also crucial because our attitude towards it helps to shape our society, and our attitudes to many other issues. What do we do about this abuse of a fundamental human right, the right not to be tortured?

But before we go further, we need to deal with a particular objection to the very notion of human rights. In a single week not long ago, I came across people separately declaring the following: their right to carry a weapon for self-defence; the right of an individual to take his or her own life; the right of Cardiff to a place in English football's Premier League; and the right of every man to a full head of hair. Human rights has had a bad press for some time. The 18th century social reformer Jeremy Bentham described human rights as 'nonsense, plain nonsense, nonsense on stilts' - and many today would agree.

'The Bible never talks about rights: it talks about duty, responsibility, relationship with God,' protests one Christian ethicist. That's true, and there are many issues around competing rights and balancing rights, but I believe that although the words are not to be found there, the Bible leads us towards a simple doctrine of rights. Human beings are made in the image of God and we are our brother's keeper. The great law codes make specific provision for the widow, the orphan, the refugee, the asylum seeker. 'If you oppress poor people, you insult the God who made them (Prov 14.31). Isaiah 58 has God saying: 'The kind of fasting I want is this: Remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free...' Jesus spells out his ministry in Luke 4 as good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, freedom to oppressed,

recovery of sight to the blind; and in Matthew 25 pictures judgement in terms of our response to the poor, the sick, the prisoner - and there's so much more.

I have no rights in relation to God: he's the creator, I'm the creature: all I receive is a gift of grace, undeserved. I cannot justify myself, attain merit, hand God a demand note. I depend utterly on what God has done for me, supremely in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. It's grace alone. But others have rights in relation to me, and I have in relation to them - though I might choose to forego them, just as Jesus did, and allowed himself to be tortured to death. But acknowledging rights is part of what it means to live in community, to be in relationship.

And so to torture. Definitions are important. Many people endure terrible pain in hospitals, through hunger, in abusive relationships. That is grievous suffering, and to be alleviated wherever possible. But is not torture in the sense we are considering. This refers to systematic brutality deliberately inflicted by a representative of authority - usually a member of the police or military, or some other state official.

But what's so wrong? Why not torture terrorists, for instance? Or those suspected of terrorism? Many say we should. And if we find that objectionable remember:

- Fear, and experience of terror, loosens opposition: after 9/11 and 7/7 attitudes changed dramatically. Suicide bombers give the current situation a new dimension. Many affirm that the world is now more dangerous than ever, and that therefore extreme measures might be needed, however unpalatable. (The world has changed, certainly, but whether it is actually more dangerous than when two superpowers were aiming nuclear weapons at one another in a policy of mutually assured destruction is highly debatable.)
- There is great pressure on politicians, police, military and security services. An unforgiving media will always ask after some atrocity: Why did this happen on your watch? Why didn't you know? Those involved in torture at the sharp end are almost always acting on orders, which may be denied by their political masters (hence George W. Bush insisted: *'This country doesn't torture, we're not going to torture'* while presiding over a regime which has systematically trained torturers for generations).
- Maybe, it's suggested, we have been too soft, and need to re-define what we mean by torture: on the notorious practice of waterboarding, for instance, vice president Dick Cheney reckoned that 'a dunk in the water' for suspects was 'a no-brainer' (and some have been subjected to this technique repeatedly). Many techniques once outlawed are now defended - sleep deprivation and sensory deprivation, the use of extreme cold or heat, or very loud music or disorientating sound, hosing with water.

- There is a growing impatience with absolutism of any kind - everything is relative, it's argued. We must do whatever is expedient. Absolute commitment equals self-indulgence, a refusal to confront the real world.

This message can now be heard from the heart of the liberal establishment. High profile academic lawyer Alan Dershowitz argues for the introduction of torture warrants. We know that torture happens, he says: we reduce it by regulating it, by insisting that an interrogator apply to a judge before being allowed to inflict torture - nothing too serious, he insists, just something like needles beneath fingernails. *Torture-lite*. Others argue that torture should remain a crime, but necessity should be a legitimate defence.

So why not? - since historically it was in general use (but so was slavery); clearly it can work to gain information, instil fear, terrorise (but it can also produce rubbish and feed hatred); and maybe it can be the lesser evil - and that's the judgement to be made: Is it, ever?

So why not torture?

Here are a few reasons:

- Torture is forbidden in international law. The United Nations Convention, the Geneva Conventions and many other agreements between nations declare it always inadmissible. Many basic liberties (the right to free speech, assembly, movement, for instance) can be suspended at time of war or acute national emergency: the right not to be tortured remains inviolate. What has changed since those agreements were made?
- Torture breaches the rule of law within individual countries: it is simply illegal. And those on the receiving end have usually not convicted of any crime. Law is meant to protect most vulnerable, and the most demonised.
- Once torture is permitted for any reason, we step on a slippery slope: 99.99% of torture involves no 'ticking bomb', which might claim many lives. Legitimise it in such instances, and it will soon be regarded as justified in many more.
- If torture is thought justified if it might save lives, where is the line to be drawn? If a suspect will not speak, is there not then a logical obligation to torture the associates of a suspect - his wife or young children, even, if it is felt that saving those at risk is more important than the distress of those being abused? How many would be too many, if it might yield the required information?
- Torture always has lasting effects - it does immense psychological harm and often maims for life, as the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture can testify after treating tens of thousands of survivors.

- The use of torture implies that terrorists have won, by seducing us into adopting their methods, and their valuation of human life.
- For Christians, the Biblical perspective already referred to should be the norm: we are made in the image of God, the objects of his love in Christ: what we do to the most vulnerable human being, we do to him.

An Amnesty International report in 1984 concluded: *'Torture can be stopped. The international framework for its abolition exists, as do the investigative methods to verify and expose it. What is lacking is the political will of governments to stop torturing people. It is as simple and as difficult as that.'*

So what could we be doing?

- Reminding governments of what they've already signed up to. Christians Against Torture are asking supporters to challenge general election candidates on whether they believe that torture is always unacceptable. We need if necessary to embarrass and shame if it helps create a climate where unthinkable becomes unthinkable again.
- Lobbying, campaigning for individual prisoners, writing to them and their families, can still make a profound difference - and anyone with the will can do this.
- Making the arguments, rather than ducking them - we must provide as adequately as possible for security, but accept the possibility of atrocity for an end which is valuable in itself, a civilised society (the atrocity of millions dying in faraway places through poverty, hunger and preventable diseases is one we seem able to live with).
- Supporting those who've survived, especially those who have sought refuge among us.
- Praying - which is an essential part of the action, since the issue is a spiritual one. Such prayer should keep us at one with God, whose struggle this is; hopeful, because though we might not see results we want, ultimate victory is by way of cross and resurrection and this is a sharing in it; humble - because of Christian history; and refusing to judge - so we are to pray for torturers, as well as for tortured, since they are often victims themselves.