

Torture and Public Morality

By Rev. Ben Daniel

For several years now I've lived with a double-vocational identity. I am a Presbyterian minister and I am a writer of left-leaning, faith-based social and political commentary. Because of this identity my life can get compartmentalized in such a way that I think about certain issues as a writer and other issues as a pastor. This is how I started to think about torture.

When I found out that the United States was using waterboarding and other forms of “enhanced interrogation techniques,” in the execution of the so-called “war on terror”, my initial response was to address the issue as a writer of progressive political commentary. I wrote a couple of pieces for my regular UPI column and for my blog, but addressing the issue of torture as a writer proved problematic—and ultimately unsatisfying—because the torture issue was bringing out the liberal commentator in lots of folk, and I was having a hard time finding new, fresh, and creative things to say about torture, things that weren't already being said better by others.

This was a good problem. People were challenging the idea that it is legal to use torture, they were debunking the idea that torture is a useful tool for gathering reliable information, and they were pointing out that torture does little to keep Americans safe. The fact that no one on Pennsylvania Avenue was listening didn't change the fact that people were talking in great numbers, saying all the right things. It became apparent to me that the national dialogue on torture probably didn't need another liberal, northern Californian, child of a granola-baking-Birkenstock-wearing-Stanford-educated-in-the-sixties mother to weigh in on the debate.

But, of course, I'm not just a writer of progressive commentary. I'm also a Presbyterian minister and the more I learned about the ways in which the United States, under the leadership of the Bush administration, was using torture in the execution of its war against terror, the more I found myself thinking as a clergyman, employing in my mind the language of Calvinist morality to sort through what I was finding out about my nation's conduct.

As evidence of my country's disregard for the Geneva conventions mounted, with photos from Abu Ghraib and news from Guantanamo, my theologically-trained brain was using the concept of total human depravity to help me understand what was happening. When I learned that a company called Jeppesen Dataplan was, in all likelihood, contracting with the CIA to transfer prisoners in American detention to countries where torture can be used without the inconvenience of the United States' constitution, and when I discovered that I can see the building that houses their headquarters from the window of the bathroom on the third floor of my east San Jose townhouse, I felt as if it was my responsibility, as a local pastor, to condemn as sin the greed that would cause an

otherwise decent company to make money off human suffering, political repression, and the subversion of the United States' constitution.

Here's the extent to which the torture issue sent me into a Calvinist tailspin: having been invited to speak as a liberal commentator at an anti-torture protest on the streets of San Jose, in front of Jeppesen's offices, instead I preached a sermon and in that sermon I did what I've never done in a pulpit: I named a sin and condemned as immoral those who engaged in it. I even said, "Woe unto you."

That language works for me because it is a sin to torture another human being, and those who use torture ought to be ashamed of themselves. It turns out that what was missing from the national conversation was not another northern Californian liberal commentator. There were plenty of those. Our nation needed then and, indeed still needs, pastors and other religious leaders who are willing to stand up and to speak in a prophetic voice: "Thus saith the LORD. Torture is sin. It's not just illegal under US and international law, it's not just a violation of human rights, it is fundamentally immoral. Torture is immoral because it violates the image of God in another human being. Torture is immoral because it is cruel. Torture is immoral because it uses punishment to determine guilt rather than using guilt to determine punishment. To torture someone is to sin against God, against a fellow human being, and against one's self, so woe unto you who torture."

Now, I realize that there's a church/state issue that arises whenever a pastor starts talking about a secular issue using the language of sin, and while I really don't think that Calvinist morality should determine public policy, it would be nice if religious thought would influence religious people, and, in that way, affect public opinion.

Unfortunately, most Christians don't share my opinions about torture. In fact, a recent survey by the Pew Research Center concluded that the more time an American spends in church the more likely he or she is to support the use of torture.

Clearly, pastors like me aren't doing enough to promote the idea that public morality isn't just about regulating human intimacy or keeping kids from smoking joints at 4:20 in the afternoon. Public morality is about building a just society.

As a Presbyterian, I am part of a tradition that is rooted in John Calvin's attempts to build a model Christian society in Geneva four hundred and fifty years ago. Calvin and his followers are perhaps most famous for enacting various blue laws forbidding rowdiness and requiring people to attend worship on Sundays. They even tried to force bar patrons to say grace before hitting the sauce. Under the Calvinists it was a crime to name your child Claude because Claude was a popular local saint. They had some strange ideas, to be sure, but many—if not most—of their ideas were good. Calvin supported free universal health care. He developed a system of free public education—K through PhD—for Genevans of every social status. He welcomed immigrants, and, during Calvin's tenure as head of the Genevan church, the most common reason for excommunication was spousal abuse.

And Calvin was opposed to torture, not just as an aside, but as an integral part of what it means to build and to live in a just society. In his most important theological work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, while writing about the ways in which the state may wield the sword morally, Calvin writes,

It is the duty of all magistrates here to guard particularly against giving vent to their passions even in the slightest degree. Rather, if they have to punish, let them not be carried away with headlong anger or be seized with hatred, or burn with implacable severity. Let them also...have pity on the common nature in the one whose special fault they are punishing...let them not be swayed by private affection, but be led by concern for the people alone. Otherwise they very wickedly abuse their power which has been given them not for their own advantage but for the service of others. (*Institutes*, Book IV, Chapter XX, 12)

My tradition always has believed that good and just laws must exist to keep humans from harming one another, because without laws, humans will oppress and dominate and humiliate one another. That's why it's such a tragedy that the United States has chosen to ignore the laws which, in the past, have kept our nation from an official embrace of torture.

We need the United States' constitution with its protections against violent interrogation and unjust punishment, and we need the Geneva conventions' laws against torture—not just because they keep us safe (which they do), not just because they protect the prisoners' human rights (which is very important), but because these laws keeps us moral. These laws preserve our decency. They maintain our dignity, our goodness, and our integrity.

So I've decided to address torture as a pastor, condemning it as sin, but I wouldn't be a very good clergyman if I didn't give the last word to grace. Grace is the divine goodness by which we may overcome our sinfulness; grace gives us the freedom to be a righteous people. I believe that God's grace is stronger than human immorality.

Our nation has resorted to immorality in its fight against terror, but that doesn't mean we cannot change. We can. We can do better, and we will do better so long as we recognize the error of our ways and commit to make amends and thereby covenant together to pursue a righteous public life.

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More of Ben Daniel's writing can be found at bendaniel.org.