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What do people of faith have to say about torture?
WHEN MEL GIBSON premiered The Passion of the Christ in 2004, pundits wondered if Hollywood seriously believed that movie-goers would pay millions to see yet another sandals-and-robés epic about the Holy Land, especially since the actors spoke in Latin, Hebrew, and reconstructed Aramaic. There were no big-name stars, special effects, or even a parallel 3-D version.

But the public loved the film, to the tune of more than $600 million in earnings. Many were deeply moved by the story, which centers on Jesus’ suffering in the hours before he is crucified.

Previewing it, critic Roger Ebert remarked on the excruciating torture Jesus undergoes. He is whipped, flayed, beaten, pierced, and denied water. “The movie is 126 minutes long, and I would guess that at least 100 of those minutes, maybe more, are concerned specifically and graphically with the details of the torture and death of Jesus. This is the most violent film I have ever seen.”

WHAT IS THE contemporary definition of torture? The legal language is in Article 1 of the U.N. Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, ratified by the U.S. Senate in 1994. In plain English, torture is the intentional infliction of severe mental or physical pain or suffering by or with the consent of state authorities for a specific purpose. That purpose could be to punish, elicit information, take revenge, or simply instill fear.

According to the Denmark-based International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims, common methods of torture include “beating, electric shocks, stretching, submersion, suffocation, burns, rape, and sexual assault.” Another category is psychological torture—“isolation, threats, humiliation, mock executions, mock amputations, and witnessing the torture of others”—all of which have potentially devastating consequences.

The same year that Gibson’s film was released, American media published the first horrific photos from Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison. There, U.S. personnel tortured Iraqi men and women picked up in the wake of the invasion. According to the investigation by Army Major Gen. Antonio M. Taguba, U.S. personnel beat prisoners, threatened them with dogs, sexually humiliated them, and subjected them to torture sessions and mock executions. Later interviewed by The New Yorker’s Seymour Hersh, Taguba said he described to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld “a naked detainee lying on the wet floor, handcuffed, with an interrogator shoving things up his rectum, and said, ‘That’s not abuse. That’s torture.’” Subsequently, a handful of low-ranking soldiers were convicted of crimes such as dereliction of duty and aggravated assault, yet not a single commander or, so far, government official, faced punishment worse than demotion.

Since that time, Americans have learned that their government tortured prisoners in Guantánamo and kidnapped others who were sent to secret CIA “black sites” where they were tortured. Suspects—dozens since proven innocent—have been kidnapped abroad (or “rendered”) by so-called “snatch teams” and sent to third countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Uzbekistan, all with proven records of torture. Multiple WikiLeaks releases, including an April 2011 cache, confirm that many of the 779 men sent to Guantánamo have been tortured, including by prolonged sensory deprivation and near-drowning through water boarding.
"Torture supported by the U.S. has a long history that goes back to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam."

FAVORING TORTURE DOES not fall on only one side of the political aisle. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan made the U.S. the 63rd nation to sign the U.N. Convention Against Torture, declaring in his statement that ratification will "clearly express United States opposition to torture, an abhorrent practice unfortunately still prevalent in the world today." In 2004 and since, the Democrats have had no coordinated, effective strategy against torture. Instead, in the 2007 candidates’ debate Barack Obama accused Hillary Clinton of flip-flopping on the issue. Pundits concluded that the Dems didn’t want to seem “soft on terror.”

In the post-9/11 heated debate over the use of torture against suspected terrorists, Americans have been divided on the issue. In 2009, 49 percent said the use of torture under certain circumstances is “often” or “sometimes” justified, while 47 percent believe that the torture of suspected terrorists is “rarely” or “never” justified (while 85 percent of Europeans oppose it).

What do people of faith have to say about torture? Given the importance of the story of Jesus’ suffering, one might assume that most Christians would be passionately opposed. But it’s not that clear. A 2009 survey by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 62 percent of white evangelical Protestants, 51 percent of white, non-Hispanic Catholics, and 46 percent of white mainline Protestants say the use of torture against terrorism suspects may “often” or “sometimes” be justified.

Others have noted that American evangelicals tend to be more conservative politically, and conservatives tend to be more tolerant of torture. In an online conversation held on the Washington Post’s “On Faith” blog in 2007, Chuck Colson, an evangelical pastor and former Nixon staffer, wrote that torture might be “inconsistent with the Christian understanding of human dignity,” but “as with all moral obligations, there may be circumstances for exception.”

In a 2011 entry, American Spectator blogger Mark Toole dismissed torture as merely “extreme discomfort” and cited a philosophy that affirms the “biblical understanding that God ordained the state to wield the sword in defense” of order and justice.

Christians who oppose torture are less concerned about voices like Tooley’s than they are about the deafening silence from the majority of Christian congregations. As legal scholar Jeremy Waldron noted in a 2006 Theology Today article, “Those of us who are actively engaged in this debate have listened for—yearned for and strained to hear—a contribution by the churches, and our impression is that interventions by church leaders in this debate have been late and hesitant at best.”

AT A MARCH 2011 conference at Duke Divinity School, people of faith opposed to torture discussed the reasons behind this silence as well as strategies that could build a moral consensus against torture among different faiths, in particular Christianity. Co-sponsored by the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), the North Carolina Council of Churches, and the Duke Human Rights Center, the conference included Christians, Jews, Muslims, and nonbelievers who hope that congregations can inspire their members to take a more visible stand against torture.

George Hunsinger, NRCAT’s founder
and a professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, opened the conference by telling attendees about when he first saw the Abu Ghraib photos. "Torture supported by the U.S. has a long history that goes back to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam," he said. Hunsinger first became concerned about torture in 1970, after reading about the "tiger cages" used by the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government against prisoners, including student dissidents.

Subsequently, Hunsinger joined the board of American Christians for the Abolition of Torture, which disbanded after the U.S. ratified the U.N. Convention on Torture. The Abu Ghraib photos moved him to initiate NRCAT in 2006 and to organize opposition to torture within major faith traditions. "A time comes when silence is betrayal," Hunsinger declared, quoting Martin Luther King Jr.

An early collaborator was David Gushee, a Mercer University ethicist. In 2006, Gushee published in Christianity Today a "distinctively Christian" defense against torture. He cited five arguments, three of them directly based on scripture. Torture violates human dignity (Genesis 1:26-28); Christians should be just, especially toward the most vulnerable, and torture is by definition unjust (Exodus 22:21-23); humans cannot be trusted, in particular when, like the torturers, they have power that can be abused (Romans 3:10-18); torture dehumanizes the torturers as well as tortured; and torture erodes the character of the nation that tortures.

Yet, Gushee acknowledged, convincing ministers to approach their flocks to oppose torture is challenging, even with young, committed seminary graduates. "Most graduates are trying to find jobs in churches, whose membership is declining," he said. "No one wants to offend their congregants about irritating issues like torture.

Some Christians would draw the line between torture, which they see as a political issue, and faith. Gushee said that when he gave a talk at a Baptist church, one attendee accused him of bringing "leftist politics" into the church. "Even the growing churches aren't interested in these conversations," Gushee reported. "They don't want to mess up a good thing and don't think it is a part of their agenda, which is one of personal growth and finding your best life now."

Despite these challenges, Gushee insisted that Christians must argue against torture. "Torture, he said, is the most unloving thing you can do to a person. It's hateful and contemptuous and therefore contemptible."

Also in 2006, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops asserted that "any policies that permit torture and inhumane treatment are shocking and morally intolerable. Nothing less is at stake in the torture abuse crisis than the soul of our nation. What does it signify if torture is condemned in word but allowed in deed? Let America abolish torture now—without exceptions."

During the Duke conference, which included Duke Judaism scholar Kalman Bland and the university's Muslim chaplain, Abdullah Antepli, discussion focused on how opposition to torture can be grounded in holy text. Antepli was emphatic: "Anyone who tries to justify torture based on Islam is outright wrong."

Speaking as a religion scholar and rabbi, Kalman Bland noted that, in the Jewish tradition, scripture is always elusive. All religions have, he stressed, the capacity to either support or oppose torture.

Richard Cizik, an evangelical leader who described himself as a "convert" to an anti-torture stand, pointed out that Puritans tortured to death people suspected of witchcraft. Catholics used it to root out and punish suspected heretics. In majority Islamic countries such as Egypt and Turkey, torture has been routinely practiced on suspected criminals and dissidents. Though the state of Israel is secular, the country is overwhelmingly Jewish and has been accused by human rights groups of torturing Palestinians.

"We need to articulate a vision—to convince Christians to think about and see more clearly what torture really is," Cizik said, who is president of the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good, which opposes torture. Cizik urged Christians to accept as absolute that "the human person is sacred and made in the image of God."

"For Cizik, the cross and the torture Jesus endured are the essential touchstones for evangelicals. "In Jesus Christ, we see God exchanging his life for the life of his enemies. The teaching of loving your enemies makes no sense without death and resurrection. All of Christian teaching makes no sense apart from Easter and Good Friday. We must love our enemies, not torture them."

Amy Laura Hall, a Duke Divinity professor who organized the conference, believes that white American Christians in particular need to reflect on why the language of human rights has been taken out of contemporary theology. "How did we lose the capacity to use words like equality, democracy, and solidarity?"

As the conference closed, a consensus emerged that faith or morality-based arguments will convince some, but will leave others, even the most devout, unconvinced. "Moral appeals alone won't work unless they are linked to practical arguments," among them that torture is ineffective, illegal, and can harm the tortured along with his or her victim, Gushee said.

For Hall, it's overwhelming to take on torture as a whole. "We have to be able to identify the micro-winnable battles so we don't risk losing heart against the massive Godzilla of the problem." She urged small groups of Christians to organize and educate their fellow congregants, then contact their political representatives.

NRCAT is releasing a video of interreligious leaders speaking against torture as well as faith-based study guides that frame opposition to torture. In terms of policy, NRCAT is pressing the Obama administration to pass the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture, which would establish an international inspection system, modeled on the European system, for places of detention. In addition, NRCAT supports a government-backed "Commission of Inquiry" that would examine the U.S. torture record and recommend reforms.

For Linda Gustitus, NRCAT's president, the commission is critical, since its bipartisan members would gather facts, develop recommendations, and provide Americans with a record of what was done in the mistaken effort to provide security. "This is not a partisan issue, nor is it an issue of national defense," Gustitus said. "It's a matter of our moral character and leadership. People of faith need to speak up."

Robin Kirk, an award-winning author and human rights activist, teaches at Duke University and is executive director of the Duke Human Rights Center.