

***Healing the (American) Christian Relationship with the Muslim World:  
Rejecting Torture – Standing for Justice and Love***  
by Dr. Rick Love

A paper presented at  
The National Summit on Torture:  
Religious Faith, Torture and Our National Soul  
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This panel has been given a magnificent and daunting task: “Healing the (American) Christian Relationship with the Muslim World.” And we are supposed to do this in only two hours! I am honored to share this panel with such outstanding people. Andy, Mahan and Fareeha represent a new generation of Christians and Muslims who believe in dialogue without compromising their faith, and who work for peace as an important tenet of their faith.

The rift between Christians and Muslims is admittedly huge. The practice of torture and concomitant practices of human rights abuse (because of the “war on terror”) exacerbates this relationship and can be compared to pouring gasoline on a raging fire. Healing the relationship between Christian and Muslims is a massive, multi-faceted challenge, way beyond the scope of this summit. Nevertheless, this gathering can make a difference. A formal, unequivocal rejection of torture by Christians would be like pouring water on the fire. So let’s talk about the water needed to pour on the fire.

“Once upon a time, it was the United States that urged all nations to obey the letter and the spirit of international treaties and protect human rights and liberties. American leaders denounced secret prisons where people were held without charges, tortured and killed. And the people in much of the world, if not their governments, respected the United States for its values. The Bush administration has dishonored that history and squandered that respect.” (New York Times Editorial Oct 7, 2007).

Dr. Rick Love, *Rejecting Torture -- Standing for Justice and Love*

The “war on terror” has led the Bush administration to disregard US commitment to law and international treaties regarding torture. By defining our struggle against terrorism as “war,” President Bush has used the Executive powers of a war-time President to redefine torture. Ignoring definitions of torture once considered sacrosanct,<sup>1</sup> he now euphemistically refers to this cruel, degrading and inhumane practice as “enhanced interrogation techniques.”<sup>2</sup>

In the name of national security, the Bush administration has also denied legal rights (due process and habeas corpus) to detainees accused of terrorist acts. The US Government has been accused of extraordinary rendition as well (sending suspects to countries where torture is a normal part of interrogation). Thus, while promoting human rights around the world, the U.S. is now persistently violating them.

I was able to get a feel for how Muslims perceived this last May while attending an Interfaith Dialogue in Doha, Qatar. When the topic of torture was mentioned, one of the participants snarled, “We are mocked by the U.S. The U.S. speaks of democracy and

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<sup>1</sup> Article 5 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>. Article 3 of The Geneva Conventions: In the case of armed conflict not of an international character occurring in the territory of one of the High Contracting Parties, each party to the conflict shall be bound to apply, as a minimum, the following provisions: 1. Persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed hors de combat by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, shall in all circumstances be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria. To this end the following acts are and shall remain prohibited at any time and in any place whatsoever with respect to the above-mentioned persons: (a) Violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture; ... (c) Outrages upon personal dignity, in particular, humiliating and degrading treatment. Article 17 of The Geneva Conventions: No physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war to secure from them information of any kind whatever. Prisoners of war who refuse to answer may not be threatened, insulted, or exposed to any unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind. <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/91.htm>. See also the UN Convention against Torture <http://www.hrweb.org/legal/cat.html>.

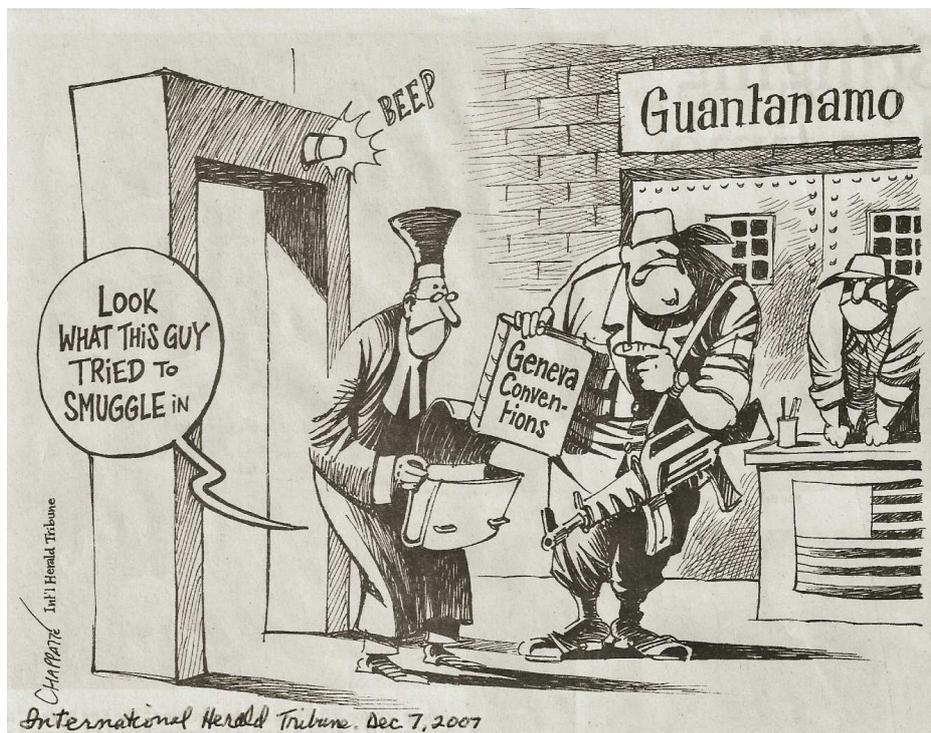
<sup>2</sup> David Gushee notes other euphemisms: “professional interrogation,” “moderate physical pressure” or even (by outside analysts) “torture lite.” (Gushee 2008:127)

human rights and then violates them continually in the war on terror.” The emotions were palpable as I looked around the room to see heads nodding vehemently in agreement.

These feelings are not uncommon among Muslims. A massive, multiyear study by the Gallup World Poll about Muslims<sup>3</sup> confirms this.

One U.S. diplomat who was in Egypt when the Abu Ghraib scandal broke out said she was told by the locals: ‘We would expect this from our own government, but not from you.’ Ironically, it may be because of America’s idealized image as a beacon for democracy in the Muslim world that its actions elicit such passionate anger. The perception is: For you, America, to go against your own values and how you would treat your own people and to abuse Muslims in this way means you must *really* despise us and our faith (Esposito and Mogahed 2007:165).

This alarming shift in U.S. policy is boldly captured in the following political cartoon:



<sup>3</sup> This study resulted in the book: *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* by John L. Esposito, Dalia Mogahed, 2007 Gallup Press: New York

The Geneva Conventions once described the high moral ground of U.S. policy as it relates to prisoners of war. Today the Geneva Conventions have been ignored and considered irrelevant at Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere.

Methods of war change but the “common humanity” of the people fighting the wars never changes. All people have been created in God’s image. No matter how twisted, broken or evil they may be, all people (including terrorists) remain created in God’s image. Because of this, human life is sacred. As George Hunsinger notes:

The cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment our government is inflicting on the men held at Guantánamo Bay and elsewhere goes against the core Christian conviction that all human life is sacred. Torture and abuse violates the basic dignity of the human person that all religions hold dear. It debases everyone involved -- policy-makers, perpetrators, bystanders and victims. It contradicts our nation's most cherished ideals. Any laws and policies that permit torture and abuse are shocking and morally intolerable (“A Moral Imperative” in the Huffington Post, January 18, 2008. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/george-hunsinger/a-moral-imperative\\_b\\_82184.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/george-hunsinger/a-moral-imperative_b_82184.html))

My eyes were opened to the challenges and complexities surrounding torture during a Global Leaders Forum in Arlington, Virginia last October (sponsored by the National Association of Evangelicals and the Micah Challenge, U.S.). Ten working groups were structured around some of the most globally significant ethical issues facing the church today. I was part of the group addressing torture.<sup>4</sup> For many of us in the working group it was the first time we had wrestled deeply with this issue.

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<sup>4</sup> The other nine were: 1. *Creation Care*: Protecting Children and Vulnerable Communities in Developing Countries from the Consequences of Climate Change 2. *Hunger*: The Church’s Role in Halving Hunger 3. *Poverty*: Holding the Nations Accountable to the Millennium Development Goals 4. *Dalits/Human Rights*: Jesus Christ and Human Rights: Examining Dalit Injustices and the Church's Responsibility 5. *North Korea and Religious Freedom*: Free North Korean Refugees Before The Beijing Olympics 6. *HIV/AIDS*: Multinational Faith Partnerships to Combat HIV/AIDS: Learning to See Ourselves Through our Partners’ Eyes 7. *Trafficking*: Let My People Go: The Christian Call to Combat Sex Trafficking, Prostitution, and the Global Sex Industry 8. *Bioethics*: Ethics for the Brave New World 9. *Peacemaking*: Lessons on Dialogue With Adversaries: Why Unilateralism Violates Biblical Texts

As I prepared to summarize the results of our working group to the larger delegation, it was clear that there was no evangelical consensus. As a moral issue, torture is fairly new on the evangelical ethical agenda. It has not been processed widely or deeply, that is, until this National Summit on Torture. It is worth noting, according to the President of Evangelicals for Human Rights (EHR) David Gushee, that the evangelical left and center seem to be coalescing around a total rejection of torture, whereas the evangelical right continues to affirm the practice of torture in the war on terror (Gushee 2008:122-123).

I would contend that one of the reasons for the lack of evangelical consensus about torture *stems from the Church's lack of biblical clarity about human rights* in general. While the most famous human rights document -- the Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- is written in purely secular terms, the ethical issue of human rights is not secular.<sup>5</sup> In fact, there is a rich and robust theological basis of human rights. Even a quick review of “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility” (from the National Association of Evangelicals [http://www.nae.net/images/civic\\_responsibility2.pdf](http://www.nae.net/images/civic_responsibility2.pdf)) and “An Evangelical Declaration against Torture: Protecting Human Rights in an Age of Terror” (from the EHR <http://www.evangelicalsforhumanrights.org/storage/mhead/fullstatement.pdf>)

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<sup>5</sup> “For the church to apply the principles of human rights in its mission is not to follow a ‘secular religion’, but to make basic commitments emerging directly from core Christian beliefs. It follows that evangelism which ignores human rights abuses in the context of its activity lacks both authority and credibility” (Wieland 2007:174).

would go a long way in remedying this. Christopher Marshall's *Crowned with Glory and Honor: Human Rights in the Biblical Tradition* (2001) is another excellent resource.

Walter Riggins summarizes this well:

In a real sense, Christian mission is the parent of the human rights movement. There are several biblical principles that have profoundly influenced Western societies in this context: The Bible teaches that all humanity is made in God's image; the incarnation and passion of Jesus demonstrate the value of each person to God. God challenges us to work for a society characterized by righteousness, justice and peace; he commands us to care for the weak and disadvantaged in society; Jesus call us to love even those whom we might consider enemies (Riggins 2000:462).

Sadly, the theological foundations for human rights has not been adequately taught from our evangelical pulpits and educational institutions.

A second reason for a lack of evangelical consensus is ***caused by a fear-based response to terrorism*** which clouds our thinking regarding God's ethical norms.<sup>6</sup> "We move back and forth between new national color codes indicating the level of danger from terrorist attack. The Office of Homeland Security regularly moves the nation to Orange Alert – the second highest state of risk from terrorist violence" (Wallis 2005:88). The Bible teaches that "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). In the war on terror, it seems the opposite is also true: perfect fear casts out love!<sup>7</sup>

A third reason for a lack of evangelical consensus ***centers around the perceived tension between ethical interrogation practices and national security***. The argument goes something like this: torture is the best way to get the information we need to stop

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<sup>6</sup> See *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals* (2008), for a detailed and disturbing chronicle of how fear has impacted the American response to terrorism and torture.

<sup>7</sup> A bumper sticker reads: "Who Would Jesus Torture?" The obvious answer: No one. Perfect love (found in Jesus) casts out fear and doesn't torture!

terrorist attacks. Therefore, we must abandon any commitment to ethical interrogation and torture terrorists for the sake of National Security.<sup>8</sup>

It is worth noting however, that the purpose of interrogation is get *reliable intelligence* to prevent an attack. The goal is not vengeance or mere confession. Accuracy counts. Information from torture is inherently unreliable because people will say anything to make the pain stop. This is one of many reasons that experienced interrogators say that torture ultimately does not enhance National Security.<sup>9</sup>

So what are our options? Can we use ethical interrogation practices (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you?”) and find good intelligence from detainees? The U.S. Army thinks so! The new U.S. Army Field Manual on Intelligence Interrogation (2006 edition), in accordance with Geneva Conventions, explicitly prohibits torture and cruel, degrading treatment. It needs to be underscored here that this manual was not written by pacifists, Sunday schools teachers or boy scouts. The combat toughened military leaders who wrote this manual are committed to “finding truth without torture.”<sup>10</sup> And that should be the stance of every Christian – finding truth without torture.

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<sup>8</sup> The strongest argument for this is called the “Ticking Bomb Scenario.” The argument is that the torture of one terrorist at a pivotal moment could in turn save thousands of lives, and thus it must be permitted. See the EHR website for a cogent refutation of this argument. [http://www.evangelicalsforhumanrights.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=58&Itemid=44](http://www.evangelicalsforhumanrights.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=58&Itemid=44)

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.humanrightsfirst.info/pdf/080624-ETN-principles-bios-15-signers.pdf> In addition, there are other excellent materials about interrogation techniques at, [www.torturesnotus.net](http://www.torturesnotus.net), on the page labeled “Interrogation Techniques.”

<sup>10</sup> See the brilliant article “Finding Truth without Torture” by Dennis Wagner in *The Arizona Republic*, Sunday, January 6, 2008 (azcentral.com). Wagner describes the kind of training given by the U.S. Army to ensure good fact-finding interrogation without torture.

Thus, Evangelicals for Human Rights (EHR) is promoting a “Declaration of Principles for a Presidential Executive Order on Prisoner Treatment, Torture and Cruelty.” The goal of this declaration is to get the next President of the United States to sign an Executive Order that would affirm the US Army Field Manual as the one national standard for all US personnel and agencies for the interrogation and treatment of prisoners.

In summary, evangelicals have lacked consensus on torture for three reasons: lack of biblical clarity about human rights, a fear-based response to terrorism, and the tension between ethical interrogation practices and national security. This National Summit on Torture addresses these three points and provides an important setting to help work towards consensus. In addition, perhaps Evangelicals for Human Rights (EHR) should put on conferences similar to “Justice Revivals” (sponsored by Sojourners and featuring Jim Wallis) as a means to build theological awareness, to develop consensus, and to discern appropriate practices on important human rights issues such as torture.

So how does rejecting torture and standing up for the human rights of detainees in the war on terror help heal the huge rift between American Christians and Muslims?

A quote from a Christian living in the Muslim world helps give needed context. The content of this email represents, I believe, the majority of Muslims: “Our neighbor who is a fairly secular retired Muslim man, in reference to the torture, imprisonment and war in general told us that Bush is worse than Hitler. A strong statement, but one that many hold to. It's hard to explain that his views are not those of Christians when he openly claims to be a Christian.”

God has raised up Evangelicals for Human Rights (EHR) to be a prophetic voice against torture. Standing for justice and love as a member of the EHR steering committee

gives me credibility when I speak to Muslims about my faith. It helps me differentiate my Christian views from President Bush's. I mentioned the EHR in my presentation at the Doha Interfaith Dialogue in Qatar as a positive example of a Christian organization that uses media to speak against violence (Love 2008). At the recent International Dialogue between Muslims and Christians at Yale University (<http://www.yale.edu/faith/rp/rp-ignwd-conf.htm>) I was proud to share my role in EHR with the leader of the Common Word Initiative, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan. In both cases, the aroma of justice distinguishes me from the unjust policies of my "perceived Christian government" and gives people ears to hear more about Jesus – the one who came to "proclaim justice to the nations" (Matt 12:18; cf Matt 23:23).

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