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**Baptism by Torture:
The Religious Roots and Meanings of Waterboarding**

Religious practices have often been tied to violence, sometimes in rituals and often in wars and the quest for empire. It is also the case that religious people have been subjected to violence and torture for their beliefs and practices, say, the crucifixion of Christians by Nero or the rise of global religious violence over the last decades (see Lincoln 2007; Juergensmeyer 2003; and Wallace and Smith 1994). The connection between religion and violence appears in unexpected places and times, and the way religious ideas and symbols form a deep background to torture, it is too easily hidden behind public discourse. One task of the scholar, theologian, pastor, or priest is, accordingly, to be a countervoice in the public arena. We must articulate religious meanings buried in social and political discourse so that believers and nonbelievers alike can decide how rightly to respond in humane ways.

The need for a careful analysis of public discourse is important now in the United States with respect to the ongoing debate about torture. The religious meanings of forms of torture need to be picked out and

explored. This is especially so when believers, often unaware of the religious significance of acts of violence, support policies that violate the best insights of their own convictions.

Part 1

What is the debate about torture in current American public life? In the flurry of the presidential campaign, the various candidates have taken starkly different stances on the question of the use of torture in the so-called war on terror, especially the practice of “waterboarding.” This form of torture simulates drowning; the individual is tied on his or her back with head down and there is forced inhalation of water into the lungs. Some candidates have condemned the practice as outright torture (McCain, Clinton, Obama, Edwards); others have refused to condemn waterboarding if in an extreme case it could save millions of American lives (Giuliani, Romney, Thompson). Within political discourse the topic has then really been divided into two separate but related questions: is waterboarding a form of “torture,” and, however

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torture is defined, are there situations in which waterboarding and other practices are justified?

The argument for the possible justification of this form of torture turns on several assumptions: that we could infallibly know that someone had vital information that would in fact save millions of lives (the so-called “ticking bomb”); that torture would extract this information without distortion; that the procedure would work infallibly; and, finally, if the information was secured truthfully and infallibly, it could be put to good use in good time. None of these assumptions is warranted. Expert opinion and empirical evidence, like the work of *Psychologists for Social Responsibility* and also a conference at Georgetown University held in 2006, concur that torture is an ineffective means to gain reliable and truthful information. The scenario of the lone knower of the facts whose torture would save millions of lives is the stuff of bad spy movies and bad examination questions in undergraduate ethics courses.

In terms of the question of definition, matters are legal and visceral. International conventions through the United Nations provide ample guideline, and, as commentators have noted, if waterboarding is not torture it is not clear what else to call it, despite the Bush Administration’s penchant to alter and amend definitions. Those who condemn the practice of waterboarding are thereby right on three scores even if some political leaders continue to disagree with the veracity of the conclusion: those who condemn torture are right for moral and humane reasons and thus properly insist that the United States join other civilized nations and condemn torture; they are right that waterboarding is without doubt a form of torture; and, they are right to question the potential of this and other forms of torture actually to gain useful information in the proposed scenario.

Part 2

Less often observed is that the practice of waterboarding has some of its roots in the Spanish Inquisition and also in the persecution of Anabaptists during the Protestant Reformation and the so-called Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation (of which the Inquisition was one part). To be sure, the practice has been used elsewhere by the great state-run machines of death and terror. And some presidential candidates admit the roots of waterboarding in the Inquisition. Yet what has not been noted—astonishingly enough—is the distinctly *religious* meaning of this form of torture, a topic that bears some reflection, at least briefly. Why the use of water? Why did this practice develop as a way to torture heretics—whether the heretic was an Anabaptist or, in the Inquisition, a Protestant of any stripe as well as Jews and witches and others? Once we understand the religious meaning of the torture, how should Christians respond?

Why the use of water? Consider a tiny fragment of a complex history (see Grell and Scribner 2002). In the case of the Anabaptists, the answer to the question about water is simple and clear. Roman Catholics and Protestants alike persecuted the Anabaptists or “re-baptizers” since these people denied infant baptism in favor of adult baptism. The use of torture and physical abuse was meant to stem the movement and also to bring salvation to heretics. It was believed—at least since St. Augustine—that punishment, even lethal in form, could be an act of mercy meant to keep a sinner from continuing in sin, either by repentance of heresy or by death. Protestants under Zwingli were the first to persecute Anabaptists; Roman Catholic authorities executed Michael Sattler in 1527. Interestingly, King Ferdinand declared that drowning—called the “third baptism”—was the proper response to Anabaptists. Water as a form of torture is an inversion of the waters of

baptism under the (grotesque) belief that it could deliver the heretic from his or her sins.

In the Inquisition, the practice was not drowning as such, but the threat of drowning and, symbolically we can say, a threat of baptism. The *tortura del agua* or *toca* entailed, like waterboarding, forcing the victim to ingest water poured into a cloth stuffed into the mouth in order to give the sense of drowning. Because of the wide symbolic meaning of “water” in the Christian and Jewish traditions (e.g., Creation, the Great Flood, the parting of the Red Sea in the Exodus and drowning of the Egyptians (!), Christ’s walking on the water, and, centrally for Christians, baptism as a symbolic death that gives life, as in St. Paul’s theology of baptism in Romans 6), the practice takes on profound religious meanings. Torture has many forms and meanings, of course, but torture by water as it arose in the Roman Catholic and Protestant Reformations seemingly drew some of its power and inspiration from theological convictions about repentance and salvation. It was, we must surely say, a horrific inversion of the best spirit of Christian faith and symbolism. Is it the purpose of the United States nowadays to seek the conversion, repentance, and purity of supposed terrorists and thus to take on the trappings of a religious rite? The question is so buried in public discourse that its full import is hardly recognized even by devout Christians.

Part 3

In the light of these religious meanings and background to waterboarding, Christians in the U.S.A. have to make a choice. They may decide to repudiate and repent a sordid legacy that now finds grisly, if hidden, expression in current practices of torture and thereby work for the most humane expression of their faith. They can reject any claim by the government to have the

right to use this or other forms of torture, especially given connections to the most woeful expressions of Christianity. Conversely, Christian communities can fall prey to fear and questionable reasoning and thus continue to support an unjust and vile practice that demeans the nation’s highest political and moral ideals even as it desecrates one of the most important practices and symbols of Christian faith.

Like the symbolism of baptism, it is a time, I judge, for repentance, the affirmation of new life, and the humane expression of religious convictions (see Klemm and Schweiker 2008; and Schweiker, Johnson, and Jung 2006). This requires that believers know the possible distortions and abuses of their convictions and labor unceasingly to live out their beliefs and practices in ways that respect and enhance, rather than demean and destroy, the integrity of life. Religious people can no long allow their religious beliefs, practices, and symbols to be used for political and ideological purposes that violate our shared, if fragile, humanity.

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