

Theology, International Law, and Torture: A Conference on Human Rights and Religious Commitment

In the post-9/11 environment, the American Muslim community has finally realized that it can no longer keep the rest of American society at arm's length while seeking to establish its own infrastructure and ensuring its continuity as a distinct community. One example of this community's increased participation in American civil society is its new-found interest in interfaith dialogue. With such reasoning in mind, the Muslim community has partnered with various faith communities to create the National Religious Campaign against Torture (NRCAT), which was launched during the "Theology, International Law, and Torture: A Conference on Human Rights and Religious Commitment" conference sponsored by Princeton Theological Seminary, 13-15 January 2006, in Princeton, New Jersey.

Religious leaders from across the nation, as well as Mohamed Elsanousi (director, Communication and Community Outreach, Islamic Society of North America [ISNA]) Mohammed Shafiq (executive director, Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue, Nazareth College, and imam, Islamic Center of Rochester); and Azhar Azeez (member, ISNA Executive Council

and director, Islamic Association of Carrollton) as representatives of ISNA, worked together at this conference to build a powerful, spiritually based coalition. Over 160 eminent religious and academic figures, authors, journalists, retired government and military officers, human rights activists, and lawyers spoke.

During the conference presentations, it became clear that people of various faiths shared an abhorrence of torture, were committed to educating their respective communities about the issue, and were eager to join with other persons of faith, including Muslims, to motivate their communities and pressure the American government to disavow its use. Many speeches resonated among the participants, regardless of their personal religious affiliation.

During the plenary session, William T. Cavanaugh (associate professor of theology, Department of Theology, University of St. Thomas) and author of *Eucharist and Torture* [Blackwell Publishers: 1998], said that in order to create an anti-torture atmosphere, churches must sensitize Christians to bring their lives more into accord with Biblical teachings and thus follow a moral order, instead of the narrow goals required by nationalism.

Rev. George Hunsinger (professor of theology, Hazel Thompson McCord Chair of Systematic Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary; ordained Presbyterian minister; and founder of Church Folks for a Better America) said: "Torture violates the basic dignity of the human person that all religions hold dear. It degrades everyone involved – policymakers, perpetrators and victims. It contradicts our nation's most cherished ideals. Any policies that permit torture and inhumane treatment are shocking and morally intolerable." The Congress and President Bush, he said, must end ambiguities in the law regarding torture by making no exemptions in human rights standards set by international law; ending extraordinary renditions (sending suspects to countries that use torture); permitting the Red Cross access to American-held detainees overseas; ending the existence of secret American prisons; ending the practice of holding detainees without due process; and stop trying to amend the ban against torture so as to permit inhumane interrogation procedures.

Several speakers welcomed the anti-torture amendment sponsored Sen. John McCain (R-Arizona) and signed into law by President Bush as a step forward, but expressed concern that when Bush signed it he also stated that he reserved the right to view the law "in a manner consistent with the President's constitutional authority as Commander-in-Chief." Rev. Bob Moore (director, Coalition for Peace Action) stated: "While we're encouraged at the passage of the McCain amendment, there are so many loopholes

around it.” He also said that it was time for the Church to speak out against torture, an issue it has largely ignored.

Elsanousi outlined how ISNA could educate Muslims about the Islamic strictures against such degrading treatment. For example, ISNA is preparing resource materials (e.g., brochures and flyers) and plans to get the message out through its bi-monthly magazine *Islamic Horizons*, conventions and regional conferences, and its website and electronic newsletter. ISNA leadership events across the nation will feature educational seminars and lectures, and will encourage Muslims to endorse the statement “Torture is a moral issue” online at www.nrcat.org. Citing the fear resulting from the Patriot Act, he asked other faith groups to stand by Muslim Americans who speak out.

Ray McGovern (founder, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity), who served as a CIA analyst for 27 years, mentioned that remaining silent against the use of torture in the name of the war on terror is as morally reprehensible as churches and clerics who did not speak out against Nazi atrocities. He stressed: “Torture is not wrong because it’s condemned by law; it’s condemned by law because it’s wrong.”

Gen. (ret.) Richard O’Meara (professor of political science and sociology, Kean University) asked religious leaders to speak against torture for the sake of the soldiers as well. He declared: “We require them to go to war and do terrible things, but we don’t require them to do dishonorable things.” Rabbi Saul Berman (associate professor of Jewish studies, Department of Jewish Studies, Yeshiva University) said that the Hebrew scriptures state clearly that since humanity was created in God’s image, torture violates the divine within each of its victims. Rev. Ron Sider (president, Evangelicals for Social Action) said that although evangelicals have not yet spoken with vigor on this issue, there is a growing movement among them to condemn torture. He gave the example of David Gushee’s article in *Christianity Today*, an evangelical magazine, explaining why Christians oppose torture.

The unanimous agreement regarding the spiritual objections to torture, coupled with the determination to work together and the welcome afforded to the Muslim community at this conference, engendered the participants with a sense of hope that torture can be combated and that this country’s faith groups can work together effectively.

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