



Book Review

Crucified People: The Suffering of the Tortured in Today's World

Neafsey, John. (2014). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis. ISBN 9781626980686 (paper)
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Crucified People interprets the crucifixion of the historical Jesus as more than a mere act of execution, but also as a means of lethal torture in the ancient world. The author wrote the book in order to invoke compassion for those who are treated inhumanely. He describes this compassion as “holy anger” (p. xviii), which he claims will lead to an individual and a collective repentance against a collective guilt for the production of vicarious trauma and lack of sustaining material resources to minimize unwarranted suffering. Throughout the text, Neafsey references modern forms of inhumane treatment against human creatures in order to provide an empathetic glimpse for privileged populations whose basic human rights seem to be secured. Thematically, Neafsey implies that whenever human creatures endure torture, inhumane treatment, or even symbolic and substantive disrespect, then an element of “the cross” becomes revisited. Throughout the book, the author argues that cruel methods of execution from the ancient world have modern manifestations such as lynchings, mutilations, martyrdom of prominent public figures, prison abuse, and high tech forms of torture. In 2004, the public exposure of tortured prisoners of Abu Ghraib “triggered the most striking and controversial connections between the crucifixion of Jesus and victims of torture in the contemporary world” (p. xii). The ultimate purpose of such extreme tactics is to incite chaos and deter any form of protest, uprising, or assertiveness.

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The author presents the suffering and death of the historical Jesus as the most extreme of all possible acts of human torture and as the ultimate cost for living with unyielding integrity. He says, “The assertiveness of Jesus is often played-down in one-sided-portrayals of him that highlight his meekness, gentleness, and pacifism” (p. 7). Within the Christian tradition, Jesus has been metaphorically portrayed as a “lamb,” but also as “the conquering lion,” which emphasizes courage and strength in the midst intense danger. With the intent to provide a 20th century comparison to Jesus’ “lamb-like” vulnerability to suffering and death, Neafsey revisits the martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, which illustrates how religious leadership has frequently experienced strain due to conflict between the interests of aristocratic power and the needs of the marginalized poor. The author draws a similar parallel with Martin Luther King’s assassination, noting that King’s death ironically occurred exactly one year following his speech entitled “Beyond Vietnam,” which denounced the conflict as an unjust war and a means to draw resources away from fighting domestic poverty.

Over the course of the book, Neafsey references a variety of events around the world and across multiple eras of human history to illustrate the inhumane and impractical aspects of the use of torture. Techniques such as waterboarding, sleep deprivation, beatings, and prolonged shackling have been unjustly rationalized with claims that they may expedite a confession or facilitate the acquisition of information that is needed in order to administer justice for the greater good. However, such techniques of torture call into question the utility of the suspect’s information as such conditions often result in coerced “false positive” confessions. Despite this, foreign policy decisions are often informed by such forced confessions.

The author could have further highlighted how broad and subtle forms of torture have been used on the state and local levels as means to prosecute innocent suspects. For example, in the case of the “Central Park Five,” detectives used deception, isolation, yelling, and sleep deprivation to coerce a confession among five innocent minors. In this instance, the false positive confession was given greater credence than DNA evidence that proved their innocence.

The resilience of political institutions poses challenges to the possibility of creating a more just foreign policy. In this context, “Guantanamo remains a global symbol of injustice and cruelty” (p. 33). Neafsey argues that establishing innocence or guilt within the context of Guantanamo contains multiple political complications due to the existence of hyper-partisanship and ideological polarization in the U.S., with the world watching. The author emphasizes that there is no easy solution to the Guantanamo dilemma due to the possible unintended consequences of granting amnesty to terrorist suspects, granting Constitutional rights by transferring the suspects stateside, acquitting detainees of charges due to lack of evidence, using international money to fund the defense, and fluctuating public support. Furthermore, such a dilemma exposes flaws in the institution of justice systems, while

acknowledging the existence of security risks with irreversible consequences if actions go wrong. The book's central message is that opposition to torture does not equate to sympathy for terrorist suspects, but rather addresses the ethics of torture as an act that dehumanizes and desensitizes "the perpetrators and it damages the moral fabric of societies that endorse or tolerate it" (p. 40).

As a concise volume with minimal jargon, *Crucified People* should appeal to a broad audience ranging from peace and justice studies scholars, liberation theologians, and social activists. In addition, the book makes a contribution to the sub-discipline of victimology, as it presents torture survivors as vulnerable to continuous anxiety, emotional numbness, and re-experience of trauma by way of intrusive memories. Neafsey states that individuals who work with such victims become at-risk for vicarious traumatization.

Crucified People also draws attention to the role that consumerist societies play in contributing to the suffering of many. According to Neafsey, Western consumerism promotes a climate of indifference to the suffering that the majority of the earth's population experience through extreme poverty. The book's greatest strength lies in drawing from both the social sciences and moral theology to raise ethical questions such as the appropriateness of the rhetoric of forgiveness in cases of extreme violations of human rights, the unjust element of impunity for perpetrators of gross atrocities against humanity, and the possibilities and limits of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. The author concludes that while individuals must not underestimate the negative effects of injustice, such effects can be overcome through love.