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Christians Largely Mum on Torture

By Ray McGovern

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Anyone harboring doubts that the institutional Church is riding shotgun for the system, even regarding heinous sin like torture, should be chastened by the results of a recent survey by the Pew Research Center.

Who but the cowardly crew leading the "Christian" churches can be held responsible for the fact that many of their flock believe torture of suspected terrorists is "justified?"

Those polled were white non-Hispanic Catholics, white Evangelicals, and white mainline Protestants. A majority (54 percent) of those who attend church regularly said torture could be "justified," while a majority of those not attending church regularly responded that torture was rarely or never justified.

I am not a psychologist or sociologist. But I recall that one of the first things Hitler did on assuming power was to ensure there was a pastor in every Lutheran and Catholic parish in Germany. Why? Because he calculated, correctly, that here would be a force for stability for his regime.

Thus began another horrid chapter in the history of those professing to be followers of Jesus of Nazareth but had forgotten his repeated admonition, Do not be afraid.

A mere seven decades after the utter failure of church leaders in Germany, their current American counterparts have again yielded to fear, and have condoned evils like torture by their deafening silence.

What kinds of folks comprise this 54 percent? An informal "survey" of my friends suggests these are "my-country-first" people — like the fellow who recently gave me the finger when he saw my bumper sticker, which simply says "God bless the rest of the world too."

They are people accustomed to hierarchy and comfortable being told what they should think and do to preserve "our way of life."

They place a premium on nationalism, which they call patriotism, and on what the Germans call *Ordnung*. I suppose that this may be part of why they go to church on Sunday.

It's a problem that has existed for almost 1,700 years, ever since 4th Century Christians jettisoned their heritage of non-violent resistance to war and threw in their lot with Constantine.

Subservience

Nowhere is the phenomenon of obeisance to hierarchical power highlighted more clearly than in the Grand Inquisitor story in [*Brothers Karamazov*](#) by Fyodor Dostoevsky, who could plumb the human heart as few others.

In the tale, Dostoevsky has Jesus joining the "tortured, suffering people" of Seville during the Inquisition. The Cardinal of Seville immediately jails and interrogates Jesus, telling him that the Church has "corrected" his big mistake.

Rather than donning "Caesar's purple," Jesus gave us freedom of conscience.

While it has been 130 years since he wrote *Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky captures the trap into which so many American "believers" have fallen in forfeiting freedom through fear. His portrayal of Inquisition reality brings us to the brink of the moral precipice on which our country teeters today.

It is as though he knew what would be in store for us as fear was artificially stoked after the attacks of 9/11.

Here is how the cardinal ridicules Christ for imposing on humans the heavy burden of freedom of conscience:

"Didst thou forget that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil? ... We teach them that it's not the free judgment of their hearts, but mystery which they must follow blindly, even against their conscience. ... In the end they will lay their freedom at our feet [and] become obedient. ... We shall tell them that we are Thy servants and rule them in Thy name. ... We shall tell them that every sin will be expiated if it is done with our permission."

Recently, prominent Baptist layman and distinguished senator from South Carolina, Lindsey Graham, gave a hat-tip to the Inquisition. At a May 13 Senate hearing discussing

interrogation techniques like waterboarding, Graham explained that, "One of the reasons these techniques have been used for about 500 years is that they work."

I was reminded of one of the things Gandhi said about Christians: "Everyone in the world knows that Jesus and his teachings were non-violent except Christians."

And the reason that regular churchgoers don't seem to know this is because the historical Jesus is not preached.

My guess is that those who go to church on Sunday expect a modicum of moral leadership. If the pastor is silent on torture, then torture must somehow be okay. How easy it is then to cede one's conscience to an American-flag-draped pulpit.

Jesus (and Luther) Didn't Really Mean It?

A progressive Lutheran pastor in Dallas asked me to give a talk to his parish on the issues I had been addressing in my writings. It struck me that since George W. Bush had moved into their neighborhood, I might ask the congregants how they thought they should relate to someone who had given written approval to torture.

I was too clever by half — actually, naïve. I would show them the "smoking gun" memorandum signed by George W. Bush on Feb. 7, 2002, which the Senate Armed Forces Committee has determined "opened the way" to all manner of detainee abuse, and then I would challenge them by quoting Martin Luther who, after all, was one of their guys.

I chose this passage cited by George Hunsinger in an essay he wrote in 1987 (appearing in his book *Disruptive Grace*):

"If," wrote Martin Luther, "I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of Gods except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing him. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved and to be steady on all the battlefield, except there, is mere flight and disgrace if one flinches at that point."

Hunsinger emphasizes that faithfulness to Jesus of Nazareth is always situational, that one can spout impeccably orthodox theological truths and still be "fatally disloyal."

Genuine loyalty is proven where it counts — in the pitch of battle, where it really costs something. Writing 22 years ago, Hunsinger was already addressing what he called "an overwhelming spiritual collapse, in which we have lost touch with even minimal standards of morality."

"The prevailing sense seems to be that, if the demands of biblical morality contradict the dictates of national security, so much the worse for biblical morality. ... Dungeons ... torture, and death are described as belonging to the free world. ... War criminals in high

places we honor. ... Acts of aggression we celebrate as noble deeds. ... of preemptive self-defense. Orwell has become our destiny. ...

"The passive acquiescence of a Christian community which has lost its moral conscience in matters of state contributes substantially ... to misery and oppression. ... 'Seek your own welfare above all else' has become the maxim of the day."

Hunsinger has earned the right to criticize those who confess Jesus of Nazareth "from the safety of some remote enclave, where confession may be true but costs nothing."

He is professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, but was so aghast at U.S. practice of torture that he devoted untold time and energy to founding the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT).

Luther Not Popular in Dallas

I suggested to the gathering of **Lutherans** that Dallas, where the "decider" on torture is now their neighbor, might be where the battle rages for them. I had very few takers.

"But he kept us safe ... isn't it better to fight the terrorists over there than to fight them here?"

There was little appetite to listening to THAT Luther in that Lutheran church. The pastor shared with me later that he had encountered all manner of criticism for having invited someone disrespectful of George W. Bush.

Despite the turbulence I caused, the pastor thanked me for coming, but noted that "torture is not high on anyone's agenda."

In a brief thank-you note he wrote, "I believe that if the full scope of the nation's use of torture comes to light, there may be need for churches to propose confession and repentance, as a positive witness for the rest of the world."

Presbyterians: To their credit, the Presbyterians have been more outspoken — some of them at least.

In 2006, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) called on Congress to convene an independent investigative body to establish responsibility for the abuse of detainees and, if appropriate, to recommend the appointment of a special prosecutor.

The clerk of the General Assembly followed up on April 23, 2009, with an appeal to President Barack Obama to work with Congress to establish a non-partisan Commission of Inquiry to bring "an understanding of what happened, how it happened, and who was accountable," adding:

"If those responsible are not held accountable, nothing beyond wishful thinking and admonitions exists to compel future leaders to resist the temptation to torture in times of fear or threat."

Good for the Presbyterians, I thought. I led off a Sunday evening talk to a Dallas area Presbyterian congregation by complementing those assembled on the gutsy appeal of April 23. I was greeted by blank stares.

This congregation was no exception to the general rule that courageous statements at high official levels do not find their way into Sunday sermons, much less workshops. A disappointment, but hardly a surprise.

Methodists: The United Methodist General Board of Churches and Society, acknowledging the results of the Pew survey, is also supporting an independent inquiry into torture.

Top executive Jim Winkler has been very direct: "Shame, shame, shame on any Christian who could imagine there is any justification of torture against another human being. I cannot conceive in my wildest dreams of Jesus Christ giving any blessing to torture."

It is another question, of course, as to whether Pew reaches the pews.

As for the Dallas Methodists, Southern Methodist University has shown itself eager to host George W. Bush's presidential library and an independent institute to sponsor programs to "promote the vision of the president and celebrate" his presidency.

The protests of thousands of Methodists, including prominent alumni of SMU's School of Theology pointing to the policy of torture, fell on the deaf ears of the Methodist bishops and trustees who blessed the enterprise.

Catholics: Sadly, the U.S. Catholic bishops cannot find their voice on torture. This is history repeating itself, for Hamlet-like Pope Pius XII kept trying to make up his mind on whether he should put the Church at some risk in Germany, while Jews and other minorities were being tortured and murdered.

In 1948, the French author/philosopher Albert Camus addressed a Dominican monastery of friars who had asked what an "unbeliever" thought about Christians in the light of their behavior during the 30s and 40s. Camus said:

"For a long time during those frightful years I waited for a great voice to speak up in Rome. I, an unbeliever? Precisely. For I knew that the spirit would be lost if it did not utter a cry of condemnation. ...

"It has been explained to me since that the condemnation was indeed voiced. But that it was in the style of encyclicals, which is not all that clear. The condemnation was voiced and it was not understood. Who could fail to see where the fault lies in this case?

"Christians should voice their condemnation loud and clear, in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could rise in the heart of the simplest person. ... They should get away from abstraction and confront the blood-stained face history has taken on today."

And today? True to form, laudable statements and papers have been produced and placed in in-boxes in the bowels of the bishops' bureaucracy, but they rarely find their way to the pulpit on Sunday.

I am a Catholic, and initially was happy to find, by a search of the bishops' Web site that there is a Catholic Study Guide titled "Torture is a Moral Issue." It was developed in collaboration with the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, the group Professor Hunsinger founded.

This was news to me. Had any of my Catholic friends heard of this? The answer from a representative sampling, including progressive parishes, was No.

So I called the bishops' staff to inquire as to why the study guide on torture had not been published and made available to pastors to use in their preaching or workshops.

I was told that it was "not designed as a publication, because there was uncertainty as to how much demand there would be for such a study."

A publishing run would not be cost effective unless it produced at least a thousand copies and this particular issue might not warrant that kind of run. (There are 70 million Catholics in this land.)

As for Pope Benedict XVI, he arrived here in April 2008, a week after media reports that the most senior officials of the Bush administration had met regularly at the White House to plan which torture techniques might be most appropriate for which high-value detainees. He said nothing.

All the more strange, it would seem, since Jesus of Nazareth, after all, was tortured to death. If the pope had an opinion on torture, he kept it to himself.

Mormons: What about the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints?

My small random sampling of the information available shows a strong propensity among Mormons toward Dostoevsky's caricature of a strong, top-down authoritative church, but with the notable exception of at least one person who could, and did, think for herself — to her own peril.

The most prominent Mormon with torture connections is Jay Bybee, a devout Mormon with undergraduate and law degrees from Mormon-owned Brigham Young University.

As leader of the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel in August 2002, Bybee approved a memorandum indicating that interrogators could apply virtually any harsh

techniques, so long as the pain involved was less than that accompanying "serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or death."

In my view, his memorandum must surely be the most shameful text ever to appear beneath Department of Justice letterhead. It was among the ones released by President Obama in mid-April, over the strong objections of many top officials.

A lively debate rages among Mormon lawyers over the morality of Bybee's approval of harsh interrogation techniques. Dan Burke, a law professor at the University of Minnesota, was incensed to learn that a fellow Mormon could justify such actions.

"I cannot believe that the practice of torture is acceptable to anyone who claims to be a disciple of Jesus Christ," said Burk.

Not so fast, say other Mormon lawyers — David Wenger of New York, for example.

"I would personally be uncomfortable writing a memo on how the administration could legally justify torture of people, but I don't think it's against the tenets of our faith," Wenger told the *Salt Lake Tribune*.

"One might believe that the value of ready access to torture-obtained intelligence outweighed the negative," said Wenger.

Yet another Mormon, a woman Army specialist named Alyssa Peterson, was clear on the morality of torture. She refused to take part in applying torture techniques approved by Bybee.

She walked away from an interrogation in the "cage," where Iraqis were stripped naked in front of female soldiers, mocked and burned with cigarettes. Three days later, on Sept. 15, 2003, Peterson was found dead of a gunshot wound at Tal Afar base in Iraq. The Army said her death was a suicide.

It gets worse. The two faux-psychologists to whom the CIA turned to show them how to torture, James Elmer Mitchell and Bruce Jessen, are both Mormons, and were widely referred to by other U.S. interrogators as the "Mormon mafia."

Add to the mix Robert Walpole, the CIA analyst who wove out of whole cloth what has been referred to as "The Whore of Babylon" — the worst National Intelligence Estimate in the history of U.S. intelligence.

"Iraq's Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction" dated Oct. 1, 2002, was a deliberate — and successful — attempt to deceive Congress into authorizing war on Iraq.

In his memoir, *At the Center of the Storm*, former CIA Director George (slam-dunk) Tenet praises Walpole as a "brilliant analyst." In a transparent attempt to defend Walpole against

charges of being "hell bent on war," Tenet insists that Walpole is "one of the most unlikely people to be accused of being a war hawk."

Tenet notes that Walpole did not think an attack on Iraq justifiable – and Tenet adds that Walpole is a Mormon bishop. Did Tenet think that that should do it, as far as credibility was concerned? In any event, Walpole did what he was told in managing the production of the Estimate that paved the way to war.

I know there are many Mormons besides Alyssa Peterson with integrity. It remains a mystery to me why so many of the ones who gain prominence seem to lose their sense of right and wrong when they are asked by hierarchical authority to do things they know are wrong.

In sum, with respect to the Christian churches I believe author Chris Hedges summarizes the situation neatly, if sadly:

"The utter failure of nearly all our religious institutions — whose texts are unequivocal about murder — to address the essence of war has rendered them useless. These institutions have little or nothing to say in wartime because the god they worship is a false god, one that promises victory to those who obey the law and believe in the manifest destiny of the nation."

The Good News

Who would have thought we would have to turn to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to carry the moral ball on torture.

Adm. Mike Mullen has called his commanders on the carpet. He is reliably reported to have been so "appalled" and "disgusted" after viewing some of the abuse photos being kept under wraps by the Obama administration that he warned senior military officers on July 10: "We haven't all absorbed or applied all the lessons of Abu Ghraib."

Mullen ordered that more be done to halt detainee abuse. He is quoted as saying, "We're better than this; and now we have to show it."

Hopefully, Adm. Mullen will stay around long enough to start a thorough clean-up of the torture mess — at least in the military.

He has acted responsibly and with integrity on a number of issues; the country is lucky to have him in that very senior post. For it is clear that, as long as demagogues keep insisting that we are "at war" with global terrorists all manner of abuse can be heaped on "the enemy."

It's always the same "during wartime." Here's what one widely admired U.S. general had to say about the German enemy during WWII. It is an attitude about which we must be aware, so that we can guard against it:

"My God, I actually pity those poor bastards we're going up against," said General George Patton. "We're not just going to shoot the bastards, we're going to cut out their living guts and use them to grease the treads of our tanks. ...

"Don't worry; I can assure you that you'll do your duty. The Nazis are the enemy. Wade into them. Spill their blood. Shoot them in the belly. When you put your hand into a bunch of goo that a moment before was your best friend's face, you'll know what to do."

Waiting for the Church?

Don't wait for the churches to speak out against such violence. We have seen enough of their vacillation to know that, for us, this would be a cop-out.

Sad to say, the same challenge facing Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero before he was assassinated faces us. And we must have the courage and honesty to act, like him, in putting ourselves where the battle rages:

"A church that doesn't provoke any crisis, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed, what kind of gospel is that?"

We cannot avoid the challenge; it is up to us. We have to supply what is lacking in the institutional church.

There is hope. As St. Augustine warned 1,600 years ago:

"Hope has two children. The first is anger at the way things are. The second is courage to do something about it."

With those two, well, yes we can.