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## "How to Do Penance for the Inquisition"

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How to Do Penance for the Inquisition  
By William T. Cavanaugh

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As a Catholic theologian who has written on the subject of torture, I often face the question of the Inquisition when giving lectures on torture in the modern world. The question often comes in the form of a semi-accusation: “How can you criticize the United States for using torture when the Catholic Church has such a history of torture—you know, the Inquisition and all that?” Behind the question seems to lurk a whole range of common perceptions about Catholicism, medieval society, and about torture itself. Catholicism seems especially identified with the past, with a medieval culture in which no aspect of life was untouched by Christianity, in which, in other words, there was no independent “secular” realm. Medieval society, in turn, is identified with a “Dark Ages,” a time of ignorance and superstition in which corporal punishment and torture seem to have found a natural home. It was a time when focus on the sufferings of Christ bled inevitably into such “gothic” excesses as self-flagellation and the Inquisition.

Torture itself therefore tends to be identified with the past. When revelations of Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, and extraordinary rendition put torture on the front page, commentators often use the adjective “medieval” to condemn the torture to which the U.S., its friends, and its foes resort in the present day. When torture appears in the modern world, it is often seen as an atavism, a relic from the past which belongs properly to the days when Catholicism was inescapable and sadistic Cardinal Inquisitors extracted confessions from heretics on the rack. The solution to torture, therefore, is thought to be more modernity, more faith in enlightened progress, and greater reinforcement of the boundary between the secular public realm and the dark passions of the religious soul.

The idea that the medieval period was one long witch hunt and torture was the preferred instrument of ecclesiastical discipline has little purchase with scholars of the period. As Brad Gregory points out, the burning of a man in Orléans in 1022 was the first

recorded execution for heresy in Europe in six hundred years. The Inquisition proper was a twelfth-century innovation that used torture in cases of heresy much more sparingly than did civil courts in cases of robbery and forgery. The Inquisition almost never used torture as a punishment, as civil judges often did. Even at its most severe, in its Spanish version, torture was rare, and largely confined to the first two decades after the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition in 1478. The scholarly consensus holds that the Black Legend propagated by Spain's English and Dutch Protestant enemies beginning in the sixteenth century greatly exaggerated the extent and severity of the Inquisition. Nevertheless, there is no denying that the Catholic Church did sanction the use of torture in the past. The Inquisition is one of the many sins of the Church for which Catholics should do penance.

What is most interesting about the popular tale of the Spanish Inquisition, however, is not what it says about the past but what it says about the present. Why is the Black Legend of the Spanish Inquisition so well known among those who may otherwise know very little about the actual history of medieval or early modern Europe? The Black Legend of the Inquisition is part of a larger Enlightenment narrative that celebrates modernity and its institutions as a darkness overcome. The Black Legend is so popular because it is a reassuring tale for us in the modern West. It sets up a temporal dichotomy between the past and the present and assures us that we have left barbarism behind. It is a wonderfully progressive story in which we tell ourselves that the present is better than the past. This gives us hope that the future will be better than the present. If leftovers like torture remain from the past, they are doomed to fall before the progressive forces of reason, liberty, and secularization.

Accompanying the temporal dichotomy is a spatial dichotomy between *us* in the West and *them*, the less enlightened peoples of the world. The spatial dichotomy tracks the temporal dichotomy because *they* are thought to be backward, resistant to modernity and to progress. The primary *they* in this dichotomy today is the Muslim community. Commentators frequently refer to aspects of Muslim culture or behaviors as “medieval.” The principal way in which they differ from us is in their stubborn refusal to secularize, that is, to make a prudent distinction and separation of the Muslim “religion” from politics and the public square. They insist—like medieval Christians—on allowing their

religion to intrude on every aspect of public life, and the result can only be the perpetual interruption of the rational by the irrational, the infringement of liberty by hidebound tradition, and the confusion of the discipline of the soul with the discipline of the body.

This dichotomy is typified by Samuel Huntington's famous thesis of a "clash of civilizations" between the West and the Muslim world. This thesis was first put forward by Bernard Lewis in an article entitled "The Roots of Muslim Rage" (*Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990):

It should by now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reactions of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.

Here the West is a monolithic reality identified with reason, secularization, and modernity, and the Muslim world is an equally monolithic reality that is irrational, religious, and anti-modern.

We may rightly cherish the advances of the modern era that put an end to the Inquisition. What disturbs me about the triumphal tale of modernity, however, is the possibility that the dichotomies I have described ironically establish the conditions under which torture can take place in the modern world. The clash of the West versus barbarism has a tendency to create stereotyped enemies. If the enemies in this clash are essentially irrational, then they cannot be reasoned with, but only dealt with by force. The "othering" of the enemy is on plain display in the Abu Ghraib photos. Chained to cages, hooded, covered with excrement, attached to electrodes, dragged around on leashes, stacked naked, the prisoners—who the Schlesinger Report admitted were not even intelligence targets—were made to play the part of the subrational Others that they occupy in the popular Western imagination. What General Fay in his report on Abu Ghraib called the "escalating 'de-humanization' of the detainees" is an essential precondition for the practice of torture.

The recent debate over the use and justification of torture by the United States government displays a dual aspect. On the one hand, we claim that we do not torture. On the other hand, we imply that we must. Official discourse repudiates torture as archaic, barbaric, opposed to the reason and liberty and modernity for which the United States stands. At the same time, the Bush Administration's attempts to broaden the definition of torture and circumvent the McCain anti-torture bill imply that—precisely as the standard bearer of liberty in the fight against a subhuman, demonic enemy—our hands must not be tied in using “enhanced interrogation techniques,” as the euphemism would have it. Both attitudes toward torture, that we don't and that we must, stem from what is commonly called American Exceptionalism, the idea that the U.S. has a messianic role to play in assuring that history moves forward against the enemies of progress, liberty, and reason.

In important ways, the United States has not really secularized at all. What has happened instead, to borrow a phrase from historian John Bossy, is that in the modern era the holy has migrated from the church to the state. By this I do not mean that Christian evangelicals have an inordinate influence in the current administration. I mean that faith in the U.S. and in “secular” Western values can take on the status of a religious conviction, for the propagation of which the U.S. has assembled the largest military in history. The clash of civilizations is a crusade from both directions. As Emran Qureshi and Michael Sells put it, “Those who proclaim such a clash of civilizations, speaking for the West or for Islam, exhibit the characteristics of fundamentalism: the assumption of a static essence, knowable immediately, of each civilization, the ability to ignore history and tradition, and the desire to lead the ideological battle on behalf of one of the clashing civilizations.”

Torture, in reality, does not belong to the past, nor is it confined to subrational, anti-modern religious non-Westerners. As much as Americans prefer to believe that the torture unmasked in recent revelations is aberrant, the work of a few “bad apples,” the truth is that the United States has been actively involved in torture through proxies for decades, in Vietnam, the Shah's Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and throughout Latin America. The temporal and spatial dichotomies exemplified in the Black Legend of the Inquisition reassure us that we are essentially different from our enemies, and that we

would never resort to such barbarism. The truth, however, is that we can only guard against the resort to torture by abjuring such absolute dichotomies between *us* and *them*.

Torture is a part of the Christian past. From a Catholic point of view, the Church does indeed have penance to do for the Inquisition. But how? I propose that the way to do penance for the Inquisition is to speak out and resist torture as it is practiced now. The examination of conscience that would precede such penance would require rejection of the many ways that we try to distance ourselves from realization of our own sins. Chief among these in this case is the attempt to put distance between ourselves and torture by relegating it to the past or to the remote Other. Confession of our sin would require not simply the admission that torture has been done in our name, but the confession that only God is God, and not any nation-state that claims to save us from evil. Christians worship a God who was tortured to death by the Empire. It is this God who saves by saying “no” to violence on the cross. Our penance, then, would take the form of resisting the idolatry of nation and state and its attendant violence. Catholicism should be particularly equipped for this, since it is a worldwide Church that transgresses the artificial boundaries of all nation-states. Having Popes that are Italian, Polish, German, and so on should be a salutary reminder that the sisterhood and brotherhood of humanity that we celebrate takes priority over national borders. We should be able to reach beyond the “clash of civilizations” to establish real dialogue among distant neighbors of all faiths. Our penance should involve speaking out against torture, in the classrooms and in the streets. Our penance should also involve the refusal to fight unjust wars and to use unjust means within those wars.

Torture is not just a relic of the past. It has emerged as a tool of state that will claim a place as long as the “war on terror” divides the world between us and them. We should of course denounce terrorism in all its forms. But in doing so we should not demonize others, and thereby create new Inquisitions of our own.