

Taking exception: When torture becomes thinkable

by [William T. Cavanaugh](#) in the [January 25, 2005](#) issue

Torture seems to have become a tool of state for the U.S. Why? If torture is not unplanned, what purpose does it serve?

It is usually assumed that prisoners are tortured to make them relinquish information. However, that is hardly an adequate explanation; military intelligence officers estimated to the Red Cross that 70 to 90 percent of the prisoners at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison were held by mistake. Torture is not simply for gathering information. There is a larger sense in which torture fits into the grand narrative of the "war on terror."

The idea that "everything changed on 9/11" generates a sense that we are living in a state of exception, a time when exceptional measures such as torture become thinkable. Far from temporary, however, this time seems to stretch indefinitely into the future; the Department of Homeland Security is the institutionalization of the state of emergency.

The goal of government seems not to be the vanquishing of fear but rather the maintenance of threat, a threat that its foreign policy helps to create. September 11, 2001, is incessantly invoked not so that history will not be repeated, but so that—to the contrary—it will continually recur in our imagination. Fear must be kept alive so that exceptional measures—from the war in Iraq to torture to deficit spending—might become normal.

At the same time, the state finds it necessary to perpetuate the notion that torture is exceptional policy. The mainstream media help by preferring the word "abuse" to "torture," signaling that it is really an aberration, an exception.

Torture helps create the state of exception by ritually enacting power on the bodies of others. As the Abu Ghraib photos make plain, torture is a kind of theater in which victims are made to play the role of deviant. Stacked naked, chained to the floor,

dragged around on leashes, made to howl with electrical shocks, the prisoners become what terrorists are in our imagination: depraved subhumans. Torture as theater provides its own justification: why should we bother with human rights when the enemy is less than human?

At the same time that torture advances this “othering” of the enemy, the government’s refusal to be outraged by torture—Senator James Inhofe (R., Okla.) declared himself “outraged at the outrage” over Abu Ghraib—reaffirms the state’s symbolic role of protector from the subhuman enemies that menace us. To openly affirm torture would be to abandon the drama of the state of exception, whereas to wink and shrug at torture affirms America’s resolve to get “tough on terror.”

How should a Christian respond? Many would appeal to what has been called “American exceptionalism,” the idea that the U.S. is different from other nations and may be held to a higher standard. Other nations conduct their affairs on the basis of realpolitik, but the U.S. has enshrined in its system of government the inalienable rights of all. Precisely what we are fighting for in the “war on terror” are the freedoms and human rights for which America stands as a beacon for the world. We must not descend to the level of our enemies.

While I agree that the U.S. government should adhere to its stated ideals, I am troubled by the way that such demands often obey the same logic of exception on which torture depends. It is precisely the idea that America is different that motivates America’s crusade to stamp out global terrorism. America’s self-assigned messianic role in world affairs allows it to exempt itself from the normal rules for treating prisoners.

As Amnesty International reports (October 27), “The human rights violations which the U.S. government has been so reluctant to call torture when committed by its own agents are annually described as such by the State Department when they occur in other countries.” What we need is a frank recognition that America is *not* different. Approval of torture at the highest levels of government puts the U.S. in the same category as Chile under Pinochet, France in Algeria, Myanmar, Israel, Saudi Arabia and dozens of other countries today. Amnesty’s annual reports make clear that disregard of human rights in the name of national security is common. As Walter Benjamin said, the state of emergency is not the exception but the rule in history.

The nomination of Alberto Gonzales as attorney general is testing whether Americans will get used to torture. We could get used to the euphemisms, to the tacit acknowledgment that exceptional measures by an exceptional nation are necessary in exceptional times.

The job of the church is to tell the truth: this is not an exceptional nation and we do not live in exceptional times, at least as the world describes it. Everything did not change on 9/11; everything changed on 12/25. When the Word of God became incarnate in human history, when he was tortured to death by the powers of this world, and when he rose to give us new life—it was then that everything changed. Christ is the exception that becomes the rule of history. We are made capable of loving our enemies, of treating the other as a member of our own body, the body of Christ. The time that Christ inaugurates is not a time of exceptions to the limits on violence, but a time when the kingdoms of this world will pass away before the inbreaking kingdom of God.

The “holy nation” of which the scriptures speak (Exod. 19:6, 1 Pet. 2:9) is not the U.S. or any other nation-state, but the church, the universal body that transcends national boundaries. If the church narrates history faithfully, it will resist the idolatry of the state and resist the politics of fear that makes torture thinkable. In concrete terms, this means refusing to fight in unjust wars, refusing to use unjust means, and refusing to be silent when the country drifts toward the institutionalization of “exceptional measures.”