

Where Is God in Christianity Today?

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

“More than half of the people who attend [worship] services at least once a week (54%) said the use of torture against suspected terrorists is *often* or *sometimes* justified. Only forty-two percent of people who *seldom or never* go to services agreed. (Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life) This analysis went on to say that white evangelical Protestants were the religious group most likely to say that torture is *often or sometimes justified* (more than 60%). People unaffiliated with any religious organization were least likely to back it (40%).

The *Ask Jack* question for today is based on this poll: “according to a recent Pew survey, a higher percentage of [American] Christians than non-Christians supported the use of torture. So why should anyone participate in an organization that is worse than the general population in its concern for others?” Why indeed? This question prompts several other questions. Why would Christians of all people favor torture? Is there something innate in Christianity that makes it susceptible on this issue? Why would anyone choose to be in a Church that condones torture? Just where is God in the Church today?

Jesus suffered torture and death at the hands of a powerful government. Most of his followers died as martyrs, brutalized and tortured. They endured without retaliating, prompted by Jesus’ own teachings. “Blessed are the peacemakers.” “Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you.” “Love your enemies.” “Turn the other cheek” And, of course, “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus’ movement was outside the power system, what people such as Wink and Brueggemann call the Domination system, of his day. He opposed those who torture. It was the same with the early Church who was victimized by violence and torture. All this changed in the early fourth century when Constantine made Christianity the state religion. So much changed! The focus of theology changed from the transformation of the social order to personal salvation and a reward in the afterlife.

The church became identified with power and wielded power especially through the Middle Ages. The Inquisition reflects a history of repression and torture. Witnesses to the church’s sad history of terror and torture include the victims of witch trials and of the church’s passive assent to the holocaust and brutal crackdowns in Central and South America. Certainly, this is not only true of the Christian Church, but this is our story. Despite the clear teaching and example of Jesus, why do we suffer this sad history of practicing torture and supporting those who do?

So why is there this apparent reality that the majority of American Christians support the use of torture? Why is the church susceptible? Why the evangelical church in particular? I suspect it has to do with the tendency here of Christians identifying closely with the state and also the somewhat messianic vision many have of the United States. This in combination with an emphasis on a theology of individual salvation and ultimate judgment by God with the threat of Hell also make us susceptible. It is a mistake to place a nation, a culture, a race, or a religion as god in place of God. The failure to “put first things first” (with apologies to Stephen Covey) reflects what the Bible calls a sin of idolatry.

The Christian Church became particularly susceptible when it accepted power. It then seemed to take the short step placing itself, its beliefs, its existence, and its survival as a supreme good. Therefore, all means, including torture, are justified for the ends of protecting the church’s influence power, infallibility, and survival.

The wisdom of the first commandment is revealed when God who is God – the divine reality behind all life – is absolutely the first priority. God’s values have been known throughout human history to be true. They are our highest values: peace, justice, passion, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. When anything else becomes our highest value, we run the catastrophic risk of becoming judgmental and condemning. We will then use any means at our disposal, including torture, to achieve what we think are our ends. We will even think we are acting in support of our highest purpose and feel righteous in doing so!

Ironically, people not operating within the belief system of religion, or at least not one they are passionate about, seem to be less susceptible. Perhaps they do not have as much at stake. When you are working more within your own set of beliefs without a sense of ultimate truth at stake, you must then own your choices as my own rather than lay responsibility at the feet of a powerful church or an infallible God.

So why should anyone participate in Christianity today? Why choose this faith? We are probably no worse, and certainly no better, than other religious faiths in terms of our support of torture. If our religious institution is all we have, then maybe there is no compelling reason to participate in Christianity. But religion is not what Christianity is all about. It is a pathway to faith in God who is God through the vision of Jesus.

The Apostle Paul spent his life sharing and teaching people about Jesus’ way for waking up to the reality of God in their lives. In the New Testament letter of Second Corinthians, he wrote about the experience of an unnamed person ((likely Paul himself) who was caught up in a mystical experience of “the highest heaven.” He confessed the human inclination to feel superior because of that experience and to think of himself as special. Paul even speculated that God gave him special challenges to keep him humble: “my grace is sufficient in your weakness when you’re open to my strength.” (2 Cor. 12: 9, *The Message*) There is no need to seek the power to coerce. That’s the wrong direction. Being drawn to exploit and dominate others is a sign of being out of touch with the true nature of God and the divine nature in ourselves. The bottom line is that God’s grace is enough -- all you need. God’s strength makes our weakness into our strength.

Followers of Jesus receive abuse. We don’t give it. We experience torture, but never torture others. We lay down our lives for others, but don’t take the lives of others. When torture is condoned by followers of Jesus, then we’re following something less than Jesus. When torture is practiced in the name of God, then we’re invoking the name of a false God.

If you are asked to choose the Church based on the majority of our history, there may be no compelling reason to choose Christianity. The Church tends to reflect society-at-large with its domination systems and emphasis on hierarchy, including torture and oppression. But there has always been a minority in the Church – a mystical spirit at work. This other tradition stands against the powers of greed, injustice, and violence. This Church of peace and compassion fueled the American Civil Rights movement, the Protestant Reformation, Liberation Theology, and other freedom movements around the world. This other Christian Church is very much worth seeking and joining today.

Will we, without denying the reality of our past, choose the better angels of our Christian history? That is the question. Will we settle for following a god who needs us to treat brothers with cruelty and sisters with oppression? Will we seek security for our nation, our religion, and ourselves through violence, including the violence of torture? Or will we seek within ourselves the experience of God that Paul described as “the highest heaven” (2 Corinthians 12: 2, *The Message*) and trust that there is no need for violence to justify ourselves and our faith because we are already justified. Will we trust that armed resistance in defense of our nation is not only the very last resort, it is also a sign that all other options have failed. And the use of torture is a greater failure still.

Where is God in Christianity today? God is in all Christians and non-Christians. Our call is to seek that presence, live in it, and be guided by it so that in our lives in God, we will find wisdom to live not a religion with God at its heart, but faith that lives in the heart of God. Our call is to follow Christ and live with compassion and respect for all. It is to believe that life is much larger than we can imagine and to experience security that only comes as we trust that we are God’s beloved partners. Life invites us to live in love without fear, in grace without judgment and in openness without condemnation. Let us choose to live this truth in Jesus’ name.