



Ending U.S.-Sponsored Torture Forever DVD Discussion Guide for Mainline Protestants

Introduction

Since 2002, the United States government has engaged in torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. These practices are illegal under U.S. law and considered immoral within most, if not all, faith traditions.

This discussion guide was prepared by the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) to facilitate discussion of the video “Ending U.S.-Sponsored Torture Forever.” **You can view and download the video, order a copy of it on DVD for \$5.00, and access all the resources and links mentioned in this discussion guide at: www.nrcat.org/300.**

The video describes the torture practices of the U.S. government since 9/11, portrays the lasting effects on the survivors of torture around the world, and offers perspectives from a variety of faiths. Most faiths affirm that torture is a moral issue and that torture is always wrong.

Six different versions of this discussion guide have been prepared to address the needs of different faith groups: Catholics, evangelical Christians, Jews, mainline Protestants, Muslims, and Unitarian Universalists. To download any of these versions, go to: www.nrcat.org/DVDguide.

NRCAT is also suggesting that you make copies of its statement on a Commission of Inquiry (www.nrcat.org/COIpetition) and ask that participants in the session consider endorsing the statement.

Suggestions for Using this DVD

This video best lends itself to an adult Christian education (Sunday school) setting. Many congregations have an adult class that meets on most Sundays and addresses a variety of issues. We have provided a one-session and a two-session option for video screening and discussion. Each session is designed for an hour or less, and we have suggested a time breakdown for each session.

This resource could also be used in:

- Older youth or college group
- Women’s or men’s organization
- A longer, seminar-style session that uses the two-session discussion guide in a single sitting
- An ecumenical or interfaith setting

Preparing for the Discussion

We suggest that facilitators preview the video and read through the discussion guide to decide how you would like to present the material. Think through your own feelings and responses, so you are not surprised during the discussion. Feel free to add your own thoughts, questions, and prayers! The video includes religious voices of various faiths – all stating that torture is wrong. However, there may be a variety of opinions expressed during the discussion, and openness and honesty should be encouraged.

Here is a quick preparation checklist:

- **Register your participation in the project at www.nrcat.org/300.**
- Advertise early and often within and outside the congregation. Announce it in worship. Consider a press release.
- Decide on the number of sessions.
- Determine the tasks you will accomplish during each session.
- Determine who will participate in leadership and reading of questions/prayers.
- Test the DVD with the equipment (DVD player and TV) you will be using for the session.
- Make copies of NRCAT's petition form calling for a Commission of Inquiry as one way for participants to join the effort to end U.S.-sponsored torture. You can download a copy from the NRCAT website at www.nrcat.org/COIp petition.
- Occasionally participants will ask for the definition of torture that is being used. A link to the definition from the Convention Against Torture, which is U.S. law, can be found at www.nrcat.org/definition.

Additional Resources

As a facilitator you may want to visit or encourage participants to visit www.nrcat.org, where we have a list of our member organizations, statements on torture from most mainline Protestant denominations, further worship and prayer resources, and ways that your congregation can become involved to end U.S.-sponsored torture. Many of these resources could be helpful both in your preparation for the class and in your community's discernment about its response.

Session Outlines

Single Session Study

Welcome and introductions (5 minutes)

Ask participants to introduce themselves. Then introduce the class and the video. Here is a sample introduction: “We come to this discussion session with many thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, some of which we may not even be aware. We may have conflicting views. The purpose of this discussion is for us to begin to discuss U.S. practices and to look at that policy through the eyes of faith. We will specifically be exploring the contrast between the reality that many Americans believe torture is justifiable in some situations and the perspective of Bible verses and our Christian tradition that has led many people to conclude that torture is always wrong. We ask that you keep an open mind to one another and an open heart to the Holy Spirit during this session.”

Video Screening (20 minutes)

Insert DVD and select “For a single session” from the main menu. The video will begin screening immediately.

Discussion (25 minutes total)

Now we’ll discuss some of what our faith traditions say on the issue of torture.

1. In the video, Dr. David Gushee, President of Evangelicals for Human Rights, sums up the reasons why he thinks people of faith should care about torture. He says, “Issues can simultaneously be policy issues, security issues, military issues and moral issues. And I join the many others in this country that believe that it’s all of that, that torture is a moral issue. And it violates principles of basic justice and humanity. From a deeper religious perspective, or Christian perspective, it’s the most unloving thing you can do to a person. It’s hateful and contemptuous and therefore contemptible.” We often hear that this is more a security issue, but Dr. Gushee argues that it can also be a moral issue on which our faith should be brought to bear. What do you think about his statement? (8 minutes)
2. We heard from Rabbi Gerry Serotta, from Rabbis for Human Rights, that “The basic element of why we’re opposed to torture in any form whatsoever is the idea that human beings are created in the image of God.” This idea comes from Genesis 1:27, which says, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (NRSV) As Christians, we believe this means that each person has a divine quality to them. How should we view both our friends and our enemies? How does this concept inform our understanding of torture policy? (7 minutes)
3. Read through Romans 12:17-21. Allow participants the opportunity to share reactions or feelings. Then move to discussion questions below:
 - a. In order to live in peace and feel secure, Paul suggests, “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.” How have we treated our enemies since 9/11? What emotions have motivated those policies? How do the teachings of our faith challenge us to overcome fear and achieve true and lasting security?
 - b. Some people of faith believe that our country’s torture policies and practices indicate that we have “become overcome by evil?” How so? How can we, in turn, “overcome evil with good?” (10 minutes)

Closing Prayer (prayed by facilitator or a participant) (1 minute)

Holy God, nothing is hidden from you.

You know our thoughts and desires.

You know our personal and national secrets.
You know the suffering of the powerless in hidden prisons
and the deliberations of the powerful behind closed doors.
You know things we would prefer not to think about.
Gracious God, shine the light of the Holy Spirit on us all.
Give us wisdom to discern when fear or arrogance has led us far from your will.
Give us compassion to see your face even in the guise of our enemies.
Give us restraint so that when anger is provoked,
we might respond in ways that lead to peace.
Give us courage to know the truth,
so that your justice might prevail and healing may begin.
We pray this because we are hungry for forgiveness,
ready to do what is required,
and certain of your mercy.
In the name of Jesus, our savior. Amen.

Prayer written by The Rev. Carol Wickersham, sociology faculty, Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin; coordinator of No2Torture

Two Session Study

Session 1

Welcome and introductions (5 minutes)

Ask each participant to introduce themselves. Then introduce the class and the video. Here is a sample introduction: “We come to this discussion session with many thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, some of which we may not even be aware. We may have conflicting views. The purpose of this discussion is for us to begin to discuss U.S. practices and to look at that policy through the eyes of faith. We will specifically be exploring the contrast between the reality that many Americans believe torture is justifiable in some situations and the perspective of Bible verses and our Christian tradition that has led many people to conclude that torture is always wrong. We ask that you keep an open mind to one another and an open heart to the Holy Spirit during this session.”

Video Screening (10 minutes)

Insert the DVD and select “For two sessions” from the main menu. Then select “Session 1.” The video should begin screening immediately and is 10 minutes long.

Discussion (35 minutes)

1. In the video, we heard a great deal about the American identity and issues of torture. We heard Linda Gustitis, president of NRCAT say, “I have always been a patriotic and proud American...and that’s where my passion on this issue comes from.” How do we feel as Americans about what we have just seen and heard in the video? How does it shift our understanding of patriotism? (10 minutes)
2. We heard from Brigadier General Steve Xenakis (ret) that American military policy from the time of George Washington, and later American law, has banned the use of torture. Why did this policy change? Why do you think the public let it happen? (10 minutes)
3. How did we feel on 9/11? Afraid? Angry? (Allow the participants to respond) We wanted to make sure that an attack in which more than 3000 people died will never happen again. Our government came to the same conclusion, but they chose an immoral and illegal path. (8 minutes)
4. We heard from Matthew Alexander, a military interrogator, that the use of torture is actually counter-productive for gaining useful information for intelligence because the use of torture incites anger in others and inspires them to fight against the United States. How do you feel about the fact that we have used torture practices despite their proven liabilities? (7 minutes)

In the next session, we will think about the use of the torture in light of our faith. We will hear resources from many faith traditions and reflect on our own. In the next [week] (whatever time will be between sessions), we invite you to think about how you feel about torture as a moral issue. How do you feel as a Christian? What do you feel called to do in light of your faith?

Closing Prayer (you can pray or ask a participant to pray) 1 minute

Holy God, nothing is hidden from you.

You know our thoughts and desires.

You know our personal and national secrets.

You know the suffering of the powerless in hidden prisons
and the deliberations of the powerful behind closed doors.

You know things we would prefer not to think about.

Gracious God, shine the light of the Holy Spirit on us all.

Give us wisdom to discern when fear or arrogance has led us far from your will.
Give us compassion to see your face even in the guise of our enemies.
Give us restraint so that when anger is provoked,
we might respond in ways that lead to peace.
Give us courage to know the truth,
so that your justice might prevail and healing may begin.
We pray this because we are hungry for forgiveness,
ready to do what is required,
and certain of your mercy.
In the name of Jesus, our savior. Amen.

Prayer written by The Rev. Carol Wickersham, sociology faculty, Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin; coordinator of No2Torture

Session 2

Welcome and introductions (5 minutes)

Ask each participant to introduce themselves. Then introduce the class and the video. Here is a sample introduction: “We come to this discussion session with many thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, some of which we may not even be aware. We may have conflicting views. The purpose of this discussion is for us to begin to discuss U.S. practices and to look at that policy through the eyes of faith. We will specifically be exploring the contrast between the reality that many Americans believe torture is justifiable in some situations and the perspective of Bible verses and our Christian tradition that has led many people to conclude that torture is always wrong. We ask that you keep an open mind to one another and an open heart to the Holy Spirit during this session.”

Video Screening (10 minutes)

Insert the DVD and select “For two sessions” from the main menu. Then select “Session 2.” The video should begin screening immediately and will take about 10 minutes.

Discussion (35 minutes)

Ask participants to discuss these questions:

1. In the video, Dr. David Gushee, President of Evangelicals for Human Rights, sums up the reasons why he thinks people of faith should care about torture. He says, “Issues can simultaneously be policy issues, security issues, military issues and moral issues. And I join the many others in this country that believe that it’s all of that, that torture is a moral issue. And it violates principles of basic justice and humanity. From a deeper religious perspective, or Christian perspective, it’s the most unloving thing you can do to a person. It’s hateful and contemptuous and therefore contemptible.” We often hear that this is more a security issue, but Dr. Gushee argues that it can also be a moral issue on which our faith should be brought to bear. What do you think about his statement? (10 minutes)
2. We heard from Rabbi Gerry Serotta, from Rabbis for Human Rights, that “The basic element of why we’re opposed to torture in any form whatsoever is the idea that human beings are created in the image of God.” This idea comes from Genesis 1:27, which says, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (NRSV) As Christians, we believe this means that each person has a divine quality to them. How should we view both our friends and our enemies? How does this concept inform our understanding of torture policy? (10 minutes)

3. Read through Romans 12:17-21. Allow participants the opportunity to share reactions or feelings. Then move to discussion questions below.
 - a. In order to live in peace and feel secure, Paul suggests, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink." How have we treated our enemies since 9/11? What emotions have motivated those policies? How do the teachings of our faith challenge us to overcome fear and achieve true and lasting security?
 - b. Some people of faith believe that our country's torture policies and practices indicate that we have "become overcome by evil?" How so? How can we, in turn, "overcome evil with good?" (15 minutes)

Closing Prayer (you can pray or ask a participant to pray).

Compassionate and loving God, you created us for your glory and your purpose. We come as your people, as the body of Christ seeking your forgiveness. We admit, O God that we have failed to be your voice in the world.

Where there is hatred we have failed to sow love; where there is injury we have been slow to pardon; where there is doubt we have failed to invite faith; and where there is despair we have failed to bring hope.

God of love and grace, we ask that you will forgive us. Forgive us when we have failed to speak on behalf of our sisters and brothers, and we have allowed atrocious acts to take place. Many times we have forgotten that we are one body and are united in Christ our Lord. Our silence has made us partners in these acts of cruelty, and we ask your forgiveness.

Lord, let us be your instruments of peace and justice in the world. Let us seek to uphold and preserve the humanity of each child of God. Help us to be the voice to the voiceless. Grant us your grace and your peace, in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayer written by The Rev. Olive Sampath Mahabir, stated supply pastor, Cadmus Presbyterian Church, Adrian, Michigan