

Ending U.S.-Sponsored Torture Forever A Discussion Guide for Unitarian Universalists

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 study 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 study 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 study guide (all available on the NRCAT web site) have been prepared to address the needs of different faith groups: Jews, Muslims, mainline Protestants, evangelical Christians, Unitarian Universalists and Catholics. To download any of these versions, go to: www.nrcat.org/DVDguide.

Our purpose in creating the video and study guides has been primarily to facilitate faith-based conversation around the moral implications of torture. We recognize that in some of our more liberal congregations there is a hunger for action on this issue, and for guidance on how to take next steps. NRCAT suggests that you also make copies of its statement on a Commission of Inquiry (www.nrcat.org/COIpetition) and invite participants in the session to endorse the statement. Another action step might be for your congregation to investigate the practice of “extraordinary rendition” which has been retained by the Obama Administration. Under this practice foreign prisoners are deported to third countries for interrogation, making it extremely difficult to track whether or not their treatment conforms to the current ban on torture.

Suggestions for Using this DVD

This video best lends itself to small group discussion or Covenant Group/Small Groups Ministry setting. A forum after worship services or in the evening may also be appropriate. An outline for a 90 minute session is provided, including a suggested time breakdown for the session.

This resource could also be used in:

- Older youth, campus ministry or young adult group
- An ecumenical or interfaith setting

Preparing for the Discussion

We suggest that facilitators preview the video and read through the study 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, reflections and

questions. 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:

- 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/meditations.
- 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/COIpetition.
- 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 a variety of denominations (including Unitarian Universalist), 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 Outline

Welcome and introductions (5 minutes)

Ask participants to introduce themselves. Then introduce the class and the video. Here is a sample introduction:

“We are offering this session on the moral and religious implications of torture in order to provide a safe and open place in which we can express our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. 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 our faith. The video lifts up the tension between the sacredness of the human being as taught by the world’s faiths, and the conviction many Americans hold that torture is justifiable under some circumstances. Our own faith teaches the inherent worth and dignity of each person; and yet some of us may also believe – however uneasily – that sometimes torture is necessary. We ask that you keep an open mind to one another, listen respectfully and share as honestly as you’re able.”

Video Screening (20 minutes)

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

Discussion (60 minutes)

Here are some of the faith statements made in the video 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.”

Torture is most often discussed as a security issue, but Dr. Gushee argues that it can also be a moral issue on which faith should be brought to bear. What do you think about his statement in the context of our own faith commitments? (15 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.” As Unitarian Universalists we often use different vocabularies of faith, but we declare much the same thing in our Purposes and Principles: “We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations...”

How do we think about this central affirmation of Unitarian Universalism in relation to torture? Are there circumstances in which our need for security should trump this religious value? (15 minutes)

3. Read the following quotes:

A. From UU minister Olympia Brown (1835-1926):

“We can never make the world safe by fighting. Every nation must learn that the people of all nations are children of God, and must share the wealth of the world. You may say this is impracticable, far away, can never be accomplished, but it is the work we are appointed to do. Sometime, somehow, somewhere we must ever teach this great lesson.”

Discussion: As Unitarian Universalists, what is the work we are “appointed to do” in relation to the practice of torture? How does this work reflect our covenant? (15 minutes)

B. Adapted from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, adapted from his speech, “A Time to Break Silence,” concerning the war of his day, the Vietnam war:

“ ‘A time comes when silence is betrayal’. That time has come for us in relation to [torture]...The truth of these words is beyond doubt but the mission to which they call us is a most difficult one. Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, ...the human spirit [moves with] great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within [us] and in the surrounding world...In the case of [torture], we are always on the verge of being mesmerized by uncertainty; but we must move on. Some of us who have already begun to break the silence... have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak.”

Discussion: How do we identify “the apathy of conformist thought within us?” In what ways might we be “mesmerized by uncertainty,” and what are we called to as Unitarian Universalists in finding our voices for our own times? (15 minutes)

Closing Meditation: (offered by facilitator or a participant) (1 minute)

Only when peace lives within each of us will it live outside of us.

We must be the wombs for a new harmony.

When it is small, peace is fragile. Like a baby, it needs nurturing attention.

We must protect peace from violence and perversion if it is to grow.

We must be strong to do this.

But force, even in the name of honor, is always tragic.

Instead, we must use the strength of wisdom and conscience.

Only that power can nurture peace in this difficult time.

-- Deng Ming Dao