

Torture, Forgiveness and the Writings of Miroslav Volf.

I wish to thank David and the Committee of the Existentialist Society for inviting me to speak here tonight.

I will start by explaining who I am not, and then who I am. I am not an expert; I have no practical experience in torture, either as a torturer or a torturee. I also claim no special affinity with the Divine in relation to forgiveness. I am not a psychologist, so some of my contentions on “forgetting” towards the end of this talk could easily be disputed so please accept this as a limitation within this talk. I have never met Miroslav Volf, but I hope he will forgive me for my poor effort at understanding his works.

Who am I? I am a middle-aged, depending on your definition of middle-aged, white Anglo-Saxon male, who is a professing and practicing Christian. I am also a husband with a wife and eight children. Professionally, I describe myself as a fulltime carer of my 15 yo daughter through necessity, a practical theologian through study, an aged care chaplain by commitment and a logistics manager from practical experience for most of my working life. I have a Master degree in Theological Studies, a Bachelor degree in Theology and I have a diploma of ministry. This talk had its genesis in thesis I was trying to write for an MA that I had started.

I was introduced to the writings of Miroslav Volf in the course of my theological studies, and I was excited by what I read, and I can't say that about all the authors I was required to read but what excited me was the personal struggles he was working through, and how they are so relevant to what we see and hear happening in the world today.

The aim of this talk is to explore issues around the concept of forgiveness. It is not a systematic exploration, but rather an amble down pathways that open up in the discussion. It will be in five parts; firstly the experiences as explained by Mr Volf and others, secondly, torture and what it is; next, remembering rightly and, truth and deception; the fourth part is forgiveness and justice, and finally forgiveness and why it is necessary.

Miroslav Volf's experiences.

The Yugoslavia conflict of the 1980's and 90's

An examination of the figures being put forward, which range from 25,000 to 280,000 killed, reveals a vast divergence both in terms of the total number of dead and the proportion of deaths suffered by each ethnic group. Disputes over the numbers of dead on each of the sides continue with the lack of hard evidence, exhibited by the vagueness of the figures and their inconsistency. For example, from late 1992, Bosnian government sources commonly quoted 200,000-250,000 as the number killed in the war, whilst the official Bosnian Institute for Public Health was citing about 140,000, increasing at the rate of about 2,000 a month from April 1993. The names on the electoral registers in many constituencies, whose numbers the rival ethnic groups have sought to maximise, have not been consistent with the numbers of killed and missing also claimed by them.

The links with propaganda and the figures of dead become clear when one examines some of the claims which have subsequently turned out to be false; for example, claims by Bosnian sources of 10,000 victims in a gas attack at Gorazde or 70,000 killed in Bihac (widely reported in the US); claims by Serbian sources of a mass grave at Pakrac Poljana containing 1,700 people which turned out to be military trenches; or Croatian claims of a massacre in the town of Makarska on the Adriatic coast in an area away from danger. These and other propaganda claims justified the war effort, promoting fear and hatred between the ethnic groups, and made agreements harder to reach resulting in actual subsequent deaths.

It is within the situation of this violent ethnic and religious war, both savage and deadly, that Miroslav Volf writes. He says, “I have a confession to make: I was once considered a national security threat. For months I was interrogated – not only about details of my own life but also for incriminating information about other people suspected of posing a threat to the state.” He was a conscript into the army of Communist Yugoslavia and soon after came under intense scrutiny. He describes the thinking that explains the threat he posed; “I had engaged in religious propaganda on the base – I must therefore be against socialism ..., I had praised a Nazarene conscientious objector for acting according to his principles – I was therefore undermining the defence of our country. I had said something unkind about Tito – I was therefore an enemy of the people. I was married to an American and had studied in the West – I was therefore a spy.” (Memory: 5) Throughout his narrative, the main protagonist is known as Captain G. as his name and whereabouts and even his life status are unknown.

“Miroslav was born in Croatia and lived in Serbia. ... His father was half-German, his mother was part of the Czech minority.” (Oppenheimer: 2) “It was the winter of 1993” Volf writes. “For months... the notorious Serbian fighters called cetniks had been sowing desolation in my native country, herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches, and destroying cities.” (Oppenheimer: 4)

This is a situation that I, here in Australia, find very hard to comprehend. How would I react if I found myself surrounded by war and the breakdown of all civil services and morals? How would I react if I was accused of being an enemy of the state? As a practicing Christian, I am called to “love my enemies”, but I would need to know how.

Jurgen Moltmann, a highly respected and eminent theologian, after hearing some of Volf’s story, asked him, “But can you embrace a cetnik?” Volf answered the question in his 1998 book **Exclusion and Embrace**. What we are using as his main text in this talk is his 2006 book, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*.

Torture:

What is torture and what does it mean?

In the Third Century CE, Ulpian stated, “By torture we are to understand the torment and suffering of the body in order to elicit the truth. Neither interrogation by itself, nor lightly inspired fear correctly pertain to this edict. Since therefore, torture is to be understood as force and torment, these are the things that determine its meaning.” (Perry: 32). By the Thirteenth Century, the Roman Lawyer Axo said, “Torture is the enquiry after truth by means of torment.” (Perry: 32) The Seventeenth Century lawyer Bocer, “Torture is interrogation by torment of the body, concerning a crime known to have occurred, legitimately ordered by a judge for the purpose of eliciting the truth.” (Perry: 32-33) And the twentieth Century legal historian John Heath wrote, “By torture I mean the infliction of physically founded suffering or the threat immediately to inflict it, where such infliction or threat is intended to elicit, or such infliction is incidental to means adopted to elicit, matters of intelligence or forensic proof and the motive is one of military, civil, or ecclesiastical interest.” (Perry: 33)

Article 1 of the 1975 Declaration against Torture adopted by the UN General Assembly states, “For the Purpose of the Declaration, torture means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted by or at the instigation of a public official on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or confession, punishing him for an act he has committed, or intimidating him or other persons. It does not include pain and suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to, lawful sanctions to the extent consistent with the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.” (Perry: 33)

Despite all of this, I am no closer to defining “torture” than I was before. There seems to me to be some common points, inflicting pain and suffering or torment, it has to be officially or lawfully sanctioned, and it has to aim at eliciting truth.

There is no doubt that the holes in these definitions are so big you could drive a truck through them. So instead of “torture”, we now use ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’, ‘coercive counterintelligence interrogation’ and ‘extreme interrogation’ methods. The official use of torture maybe considered rampant in the world today. When we mention Abu Ghraib, Cambodia, Guantanamo Bay, Chile, Bhutan, Argentina, Syria, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Iran, apartheid South Africa, Libya and the list goes on, we are confronted by the ever present threat of “torture” on our doorstep. Does Australia sanction the use of torture at its military deployments? I don’t want to know! Ignorance is bliss, but it is also failure.

Then there are the historical records of torture at the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, the great Christian crusades against the Saracens at Jerusalem, the Third Reich, Stalin’s Russia, McCarthy’s communist hunts in America, the Kymer Rouge in Cambodia, the many thousands who just disappeared in Chile and Argentina, just to name a few.

Yet the imposition of torture is still unacceptable, hidden and unspoken until exposed.

Why is torture so unacceptable to the general public who would support a war action? I think there are three issues that need mentioning; firstly torture is very personal, “torture is a uniquely cruel method of intimidation and domination by one person, or a group of persons, over another person. Torture morally degrades both its victim and its perpetrators.” (Perry: 36) Secondly, its use is difficult to moderate or control, as its aim is to elicit information or “truth”, there is no end point as the information or “truth” is unknown. As the aim is to “get the lot”, the ability of the torturer to stop is degraded by the desire to get **more** information, “truth” and kudos. Thirdly, “torture” gives power, morally degrading power to people who do not usually have power, as we saw with the demeaning of prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

In arriving at this point, we have called for a “moral obligation to seek the truth” and looked at the morally degrading power of torture. As the aim of torture is to breakdown the will of the victim, and the aim of the victim is to stop the pain and suffering which they think will happen if they give an answer. But do we get a truthful answer through the use of torture or do we get answer we think the torturer wants to know.

“Beaten with an electric cable, threatened with even more severe forms of torture, forced to endure the screams of fellow prisoners, [Maher] Arar confessed to having been in Afghanistan. “They kept

beating me so I had to falsely confess and told them I did go to Afghanistan, I was ready to confess to anything if it would stop the torture. They wanted me to say I went to a training camp. I was so scared ...” (Perry: 45)

Can “torture elicit truth”? Or put another way, can we use torture to provide “truthful” responses? That I will leave for another essay!

Remembering Rightly.

The title of Volf’s book, “The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World” outlines our personal responsibilities in how we present our story in the future.

How do we remember when we recall events that occurred in our past that hurt us physically, mentally or emotionally? We are the victim of abuse, and we are entitled to recall and remember. But how do we remember? Does our memory play tricks on us? Do we feel entitled to exaggerate the extent and severity of the abuse? To remember other than rightly moves the abuser into the role of victim, and us into the role of abuser; if we do not remember rightly, we become an abuser too.

We are also required to remember truthfully. This is a minefield, because ‘truth’ is dangerous, especially if one side or the other claim to possess the truth. Possessing the truth, immediately put you into conflict with the other if they also claim to possess the truth, and it is different than your truth. It used to be said, the winner writes the history. One can no longer say this as history is now written as it happens with millions of mobile phone cameras and instant reporting over the social networks and the internet. We know that to claim ‘possession of the truth’ is dangerous, and this is seen very clearly in ideological, nationalist and religious fundamentalist movements around the world now.

What we need is “the *moral obligation* of both parties to *seek* the truth.” (Memory: 58) Volf writes “resentment for humiliation endured may distort the memory even of a run-of-the-mill wrongdoing endured. The victim’s imagination may then spin a tale of sinister malevolence or callous carelessness at work against him, when in fact the wrongdoing was simply the fallout of the perpetrator’s own unsuccessful struggle against a personal weakness. Or consider what a victim’s memory might do when faced with a perpetrator editing the past so as to whitewash his crimes, even make them disappear. A victim will want to resist him; and so a battle of memories ensues. ... In the heat of battle, the perpetrator’s blame grows in the victim’s eyes beyond anything that is warranted by what actually happened. So, the wrongdoer becomes both perpetrator who truly deserves blame and the scapegoat who carries more blame than is his due.” (Memory: 60) Here Volf brings in Captain G. and argues this point in relation to his own situation.

This I believe is far more prevalent than we would like to believe. I bet you can all remember when you have been a victim, and exaggerated the actual event on recall. Ask yourself, why!

“The obligation to truthfulness in remembering is at its root an obligation to do justice” (Memory: 55)

And how do we determine what is just? As a Christian, I have biblical texts “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6: 8)

Can we “act justly”, or can we act as we understand justly? In my way of thinking capital punishment is unjust under any circumstance, but there are many people who believe it is just under some circumstances. Can we, as a community, act justly if we don’t agree on what is just?

Truth & Deception:

It has been said, “there is no such thing as truth” and in general terms, I don’t think too many people would disagree. But for each of us, individually, we have our truth and this is the truth that we work with in memory and to which we have to “remember rightly”.

Elie Wiesel, holocaust survivor, at the trial of the Gestapo Captain Klaus Barbie, who headed the anti-resistance group in France said, “Justice without memory is an incomplete justice, false and unjust. To forget would be an absolute injustice in the same way that Auschwitz was an absolute crime. To forget would be the enemy’s final triumph.” (Embrace: 234 quoting Elie Wiesel, 1990, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences*, Summit Books, NY)

When I was growing up, I was told by my father, “history is written by the winner”, and the loser is relegated to the pages of infamy. In today’s world this is no longer the case. Even with the greatest of efforts to repress reporting of events, text and vision are transmitted around the world as they happen. We cannot erase memory totally, many attempts have been made throughout history, but memory slips through the finger of deception and rears its head in a new place, recalling past events.

“Rosa Luxembourg is reported to have said: “The most revolutionary deed is and always will remain to say out loud what is the case.”” (Embrace: 235) Vaclav Havel, Czech writer, dramatist, the last President of Czechoslovakia, and the first President of the Czech Republic, wrote “When a “regime of truth” is imposed, when cultural mores, public opinion, or decrees of a totalitarian state codify what may or may not be said, saying out loud what is the case may indeed be revolutionary. If you say some things that you know are the case too loudly, you may lose not only a friend or a job, but even your life. (Embrace: 236 quoting *Living in Truth*, Faber & Faber, London)

To deceive or repress, is an open invitation for the ‘truth’ to be expressed. To deceive or repress is the beginning of the battle “to say out loud what is the case”, and when repressive regimes attempt to quieten the voice, it only gives the voice more power.

Martin Luther King, Jr in 1967 wrote
Many of the ugly pages of American history have been obscured and forgotten....America owes a debt of justice which it has only begun to pay. If it loses the will to finish or slackens in its determination, history will recall its crimes and the country that would be great will lack the most indispensable element of greatness-- justice.(Chaos or Community?)

I would like to read you a poem written some years ago that tries to express this from a personal perspective.

A poem from an unpublished 'little book of poems' from 2005

Life is so full of voices
That mine sometimes gets lost.
I feel I am screaming into the wind
And my voice is being blown away

No-one hears me,
A voice in a myriad of voices
All fighting to be heard.
The voice disappears.

Who am I
That no-one listens to
What I need to say?

Who am I
When the words fail
And are ignored?

Who am I
When no-one wants
To hear my story?

I see others around me
With bewilderment on their faces,
their mouths are moving
but I hear no words.

I am not alone, its not just me
The voiceless are everywhere
Surrounding me with many voices
Silent and unheard.

Do I give up speaking,
Do I give up hoping,
Do I give up?

When the voiceless speak as one
The sound will drown all other noise
With the thunder of the groaning
From the pain of being heard.

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Forgiveness and why it is necessary:

Whether you subscribe to the Christian belief in God or not, the question of forgiveness looms large in how we live our lives. Can we define 'forgiveness'? Macquarie Dictionary says, "1. To grant free pardon for, or remission of (an offence ...); 2. To give up all claim on account of; 3. To grant free

pardon to (a person); 4. To cease to feel resentment against; *to forgive one's enemies*; 5. To pardon an offence or an offender.

Why would we want to do any of these? Retribution makes a lot more sense when you have been humiliated, physically injured, mentally damaged and your humanity has been defiled. But retribution has its very own downside. Retribution draws the victim down to the level of the perpetrators. By its very nature, retribution is the inflicting of evil upon another; whether deserved or not, retribution begets evil.

Jean-Luc Marion wrote, “Before all else, evil hurts. Whether suffering affects me physically or morally, it imposes itself with pain, as a pain. Evil is experienced as the only indisputable fact, short of all delusion, that is exempt from the need for any proof or argument. The evil that hurts me never deceives. This pain, as I undergo it, necessitates my reacting to it in order to free myself from it; thus, even my struggle against suffering, in the very moment when I am attempting to deliver myself from its sting, proceeds, like a passion from the evil I undergo. For if evil’s first effect is suffering, its second is the demand that the suffering cease, at any price and at once. The logic of evil thus puts forth its first necessity by arousing in me, who is suffering, the desire for another evil; to destroy the cause of the evil that is destroying me ...” (Marion: 2)

Evil begets evil. Evil controls the life. Forgiveness confronts evil as a non-negotiable response to retribution. I have a number of books on why I should forgive; they are all Christian authors. But I would suggest that forgiveness is also a requirement for professing non-Christians.

To what end do we forgive? As a practicing Christian I am required to forgive as Christ has forgiven me. My books tell me why, but there is very little on how I can forgive someone who has done grievous harm to me or a member of my family. To forgive is a conscious act of non-violence, whether physical or mental, aimed directly at the perpetrator of a conscious act against you. The aim of this act of charity, because forgiveness is indeed an act of charity, is to regain control of your own life.

“The greatest obstacle to forgiving comes from the deeds that need to be forgiven. [...] offenders have inflicted pain and are sometimes stained with blood. Injuries to forgivers’ bodies and souls stand in the way of forgiving. So do smugness and enmity of the wrongdoers. The offenses and the offensiveness of wrongdoers collude with the self-love of the wronged to make it difficult to forgive, very difficult.” (Charge: 194)

“If one speaks of torture, one must take care not to exaggerate. What was inflicted on me ... was by far not the worst form of torture. No red-hot needles were shoved under my fingernails, nor were any lit cigars extinguished on my bare chest. What did happen to me there ... was relatively harmless and it left no conspicuous scars on my body. And yet, twenty-two years after it occurred, on the basis of an experience that in no way probed the entire range of possibilities, I dare to assert that torture is the most horrible event a human being can retain within himself, - Jean Amery” (Perry: 59)

Jean Amery was a victim of the Nazi regime during World War 2

Torture, or any grievous harm suffered, will change your life forever. But to hold onto that as the overriding influence in your life story is to delegate yourself to role of perpetual victim, and my

friends, you are not then the victim, you are a volunteer because you allow yourself to be ruled by the perpetrator and their action.

“Grievous wrongdoing doesn’t just wound the body and soul, and it doesn’t just worm its way into our identity. It also entraps us. Like a ball chained to a prisoner’s leg, it drags heavily on our spirit and prevents it from roaming freely, stretching itself into the unknown, playing with new possibilities. A wrongdoing endured robs a person of the future,” (Memory: 81)

To what end do we forgive? We forgive to regain our life and take control of our future. “No matter what that person will do, I have a responsibility to try and make a friend out of the enemy.” (Abernethy: 4) Remember we are trying to take control of our life back from the powerful hold of the evil that was inflicted on us. But in doing this, I have to **remember rightly** the evil I have inflicted on the “other”. That may be physical, mental or emotional. It may be what I have written or spoken in haste, exaggerated in extent, or even thought. To take back control, I have to fully embrace the concept of forgiveness, because if I don’t, there can be no forgiveness.

You are probably thinking that’s impossible, and I believe that true forgiveness is the hardest act that can be achieved in this world. As a Christian, I am called to “forgive as Jesus has forgiven me”. I have to strive to achieve this ultimate goal. But for non-Christians, the ultimate goal is the rest of your life. I do realise that you may not want to forgive; to aim for retribution in the name of justice. Volf explains “I hope that each one of us can overcome propensity toward violence. I can very well understand and see how we might have propensity toward violence. We, after all, get violated And those of us who are violated, we want to respond in kind. We want retribution. We want justice. Most of violence that’s perpetuated is not violence for violence’s sake. It’s violence in order to redress a violation that has previously occurred. I think each one of us – we can choose the path of peace, rather than the path of violence.” (Abernethy: 1)

Forgiveness and Justice:

One issue that needs to be mentioned is the relationship between forgiveness and justice. Community does not forgive, individuals, the direct recipients of harm, are the only ones who can forgive. Community requires justice. Communities require justice to protect themselves from further harm. Without justice the world would descend into chaos, evil for the sake of evil would rule. The weak would be denied protection and the powerful would rule under their own rules. With justice as the imperative rule, the demand for justice would demand retribution and plunge the community into dictatorship as justice becomes the master. Both options are unacceptable. In Australia, we do not have enough prison space for the current prisoners, many of whom are one time offenders who should not be incarcerated. One response to this dilemma is called restorative justice

Restorative justice has been defined as:

An approach to justice that focuses on repairing the harm caused by crime while holding the offender responsible for his or her actions, by providing an opportunity for the parties directly affected by a crime – victims[s], offender and community – to identify and address their needs in the aftermath of a crime, and seek a resolution that affords healing, reparation and reintegration, and prevents future harm.

Restorative justice challenges prevailing adversarial criminal justice systems, organised under the notion that crimes are perpetrated against the state, rather than recognising that crimes are perpetrated, in the main, against victims and /or communities. Restorative justice is a philosophy that; “moves from punishment to reconciliation, from vengeance against offenders to healing for victims, from alienation and harshness to community and wholeness, from negativity and destructiveness to healing, forgiveness and mercy”.¹

Justice is needed by community. Forgiveness does not take away the need for justice. Forgiveness allows the role of justice to move away from retributive to restorative. The evil committed against you can spawn evil with the demand for retribution and revenge, but the evil can also be turned into an act of restoration, as forgiveness removes the call for this second evil, revenge, to occur.

Non-Remembrance and Identity:

“What does it mean for me to be who I am, and how do my memories of wrongs that I have suffered figure in my being who I am?” (Memory: 193) Everything that happens to us affects our future; we are who we are by the accumulation of experience. The real issue for each of us is how do we understand an experience and how much do we let it direct our lives? We witness and are present at many events that touch the periphery of our lives which we would be hard pressed to recall. We “forget” most things in our day to day lives. Can anyone here tell me about their actions on 15th July 1999? I can’t, and I don’t need to, as I ascribed to each action a priority and proceeded to forget the actions of that day as they were no longer necessary. A major event may have occurred on that day, and if it did, I have forgotten the day and the time; the event may be there but not the precise details. I am who I am through the accumulation of experiences, and also through forgetting. But to forget traumatic events is to lose part of my identity, and that could have unforeseen consequences. Miroslav Volf, in this book seeks to integrate his experiences into his life to be able to understand what happened and therefore to keep control of his life, and not let the experiences rule his future.

“We are able to maintain a sense of identity with a rather unruly memory – a memory that remembers some important events but not others, that remembers them for a time but not permanently, that plays tricks on us and “remembers” when there is nothing to remember and does not remember when there is something to remember, a memory that skips over vast neighborhoods of lived space but dances persistently in some small alley spinning a web of truths, half-truths, lies, deletions, additions, and embellishments. Many of us live happily without trying to give memories a narrative coherence.” (Memory: 197) This is why most of us will never attempt to write a life story!

Conclusion:

During this talk we have ambled down a path that has, by necessity, left a lot of questions unanswered. But I believe it is important for each of us to understand how events in our lives influence how we live and act in this world. For Christians, we are called to forgive, just as the Lord has forgiven us, but for non-Christians the need to forgive is a powerful call to take control of your

¹ See “Making Prison(er)s ...”

own life. How we can accomplish this is very difficult. The ability to accomplish this is, I believe, even harder. The desire to accomplish this takes enormous self-will. To actually accomplish it is almost unbelievable.

The incessant call to arms to protect against the “other”, be they terrorists or patriots, be they rebels or freedom fighters, has to always be moderated by the desire for justice and peace. The call to fight is not always ‘for the right reasons’, which asks the question, why are we being called to fight? Countries fight for power, control, and perceived security. Individuals fight for exactly the same reasons. To say no to oppression, to political pressure to conform, to peer pressure to join in is to expose yourself to oppression, persecution and to being ostracised by your community. But it is in facing the ‘other’ that we can see ourselves when we are placed “in their shoes”.

The use of torture in the world seems to be increasing and becoming acceptable, and yet it has no seeming value apart from a dubious claim to aim for truth. Friends, this is a claim that cannot be justified unless the call for justice is ignored. And to ignore justice is to invite anarchy to rule our lives.

We are all the sum of our upbringing, our experiences and our relationships, both individually and in community, and for one unpalatable moment of our life to dominate the rest, leaves us unsatisfied, unbalanced and open to the depressing reality of an event being repeated over and over and over ... as in Groundhog Day. But even Groundhog Day came out well in the end. But it took time. Miroslav Volf took time, because time and distance is what is needed to help understand events in context of our lives, but it is your life so live it as you would live it, and not as someone else would force you to live it.

To finish off, let me say, this is a beginning. What I have not said would fill a dozen encyclopaedias. I would encourage anyone who has an interest to pursue these topics further to read some of Volf’s works, especially *Exclusion and Embrace* and *The End of Memory*. What really struck me as I was reading Volf was the unexpectedness of the whole event. So my friends, I would encourage you to oppose the use of torture, ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’, ‘coercive counterintelligence interrogation’ and ‘extreme interrogation’ methods whenever you can, because you never know when they will be used against you.

Thank you all, for giving me your time. Thank You very much.

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Existentialist Society Public Lecture – Tuesday 7th June 2011 presented by Craig Coulson

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[Amnesty International](#)
[American Civil Liberties Union \(ACLU\)](#)
[Campaign to Ban Torture](#)
[The Campaign to Repeal the Torture Law](#)
[Center for Constitutional Rights \(CCR\)](#)
[Center for Theology and Social Analysis \(CTSA\)](#)
[Evangelicals for Human Rights](#)
[Friends Committee on National Legislation \(FCNL\)](#)
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Resources for Torture Victims:

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