Journal of Textual Reasoning 4:1 (November 2005)
ISSN: 1939-7518

THE ETHICS OF THE NEIGHBOR: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

JACK MILES
J. Paul Getty Trust

Among the many books of the Tanakh, the Book of Jonah has been a Christian favorite for several reasons, of which the most colorful is that Jonah's liberation from three days' imprisonment in the belly of the whale has been taken as a symbol of Christ's liberation from his three days' imprisonment in the tomb. The Passover haggadah tells the story of how God freed Israel from bondage in Egypt, a story that has had a powerful appeal over the centuries for all those who groan in bondage. In the Christian haggadah, so to call it, imprisonment in Egypt is replaced by imprisonment to death, and entry into a promised land is replaced by entry into eternal life; and this story, too, has been susceptible to multiple adaptations. There are many kinds of resurrection, just as there are many kinds of exodus.

Bondage and exodus, imprisonment and liberation—these are endlessly fruitful images. But for a second, more historical reason, actual prisoners have a further claim on the Christian imagination. To the Christian mind, it matters as well, and enormously, that Jesus himself was a prisoner. To speak the language of American law enforcement, his death was a death in custody. His most influential followers, Peter and Paul,

were also prisoners. They too died in custody. John the Baptist, who first acclaimed Jesus as Messiah, was beheaded in a Roman prison. Christianity is a religion founded by men in deep trouble with the law, men familiar with the inside of prisons, whose message was "the last shall be first, and the first last."

In religious ethics as formulated in our monotheistic traditions, what is owed to the neighbor is simultaneously owed to God himself. The Christian way of imagining this double duty exploits the fact that Christianity's God has appeared in human form. Thus, when doing good deeds for our fellow human beings, we as Christians seek to imagine that we are simultaneously doing them for Christ in person. Jesus taught his followers to imagine themselves hearing his voice saying, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you came to me," and finally: "I was in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25:35-36).

Allow me, if I may, at this dark and shameful moment in our history, to linger over the last entry on that list: "I was in prison and you visited me." Jesus gives every item on his list twice—once in a positive formulation, for praise, and once in a negative formulation, for blame. Thus, "I was in prison and you did not visit me." Can you imagine what it is like to be in prison waiting for a visit that does not come? But let me ask an easier question: Do you know where the nearest jail is? When you leave the parking structure this evening, could you instead of driving home drive to the Central Men's Jail of Los Angeles County? County Jail is a big, big building—actually a set of buildings bigger than the largest downtown hotel. It houses close to seven thousand inmates. It may fairly be called one of the central institutions of this metropolis. But have you ever laid eyes on it?

Ten years ago, when I was still working for the *Los Angeles Times*, I discovered County Jail almost by accident. At that time, I had worked out a back-streets route to escape rush-hour traffic. My route led east from the Times Building, skirted Skid Row, then headed north on the east side of Union Station, then east again across the Los Angeles River toward Boyle

Heights and northeast from there. I grew so familiar with this zigzag shortcut that I knew every building along the way. I didn't fail to notice, then, when a large new building started to go up on a brick-strewn no-man's-land northeast of Union Station. Octagonal in shape and windowless, this building, set well back from the street, appeared to be some kind of power plant or transmitting station. After the first month or so, I noticed that there were actually two octagonal structures under construction.

This sort of thing doesn't ordinarily much interest me; but leaving one Friday for a three-day weekend, I noticed that a large sign had gone up of the usual sort that one sees in front of construction sites. I decided to park and walk across the rubble to read what it said. It was then that I learned that the two octagonal structures were in fact additions to the Men's Central Jail and that, after all, they were not windowless. What looked at a distance like seams were actually tall, narrow, slit-like windows.

The strange architecture of these prisons, which, as I would learn on inquiry, were designed to be panopticons of the sort first dreamt up by Jeremy Bentham, fascinated me. I persuaded the *Atlantic Monthly* that an article on them would make interesting reading. After a meeting at the prison with representatives of the Sheriff's Department and with the architectural firm that had won this most unusual commission, it was agreed that I would be allowed to write an article about the new buildings from the inside, that is, before they were occupied. Unfortunately, the publication of my book *God: A Biography* at just that time took over my life more completely than I had ever dreamed it would; and I never got around to writing that article.

What I took away from my discovery, however, was a humbling and somewhat disturbing reflection on, as it happens, the Shoah, the genocidal slaughter of Europe's Jews by Nazi Germany. In discussions of the Shoah, I had heard the question asked more than once: "Did the Germans know?" Almost always, the conclusion reached was that, yes, they surely did know. Were I a German living in that era, I had wondered, would I have known? Would I have spoken out? The fact that until stumbling upon the largest jail in my own city in this way I had not known its location and

that this bit of ignorance had never bothered me in the slightest seemed a damning commentary on my social awareness. Now, unlike the concentration camps, County Jail is not a secret facility; it is not located outside the borders of the United States. Nonetheless it had never occurred to me to ask even the first question about it. If I had been a German living in 1946, would it have been an adequate defense to say that I didn't know about the death camps simply because it had never occurred to me to ask? Yet in Los Angeles this flimsy excuse seemed to be my only defense.

The new buildings turned out to be just steps from the existing jail, itself a gigantic structure that however I only discovered on that same first stop. As I walked down the short, curving cul-de-sac that separated the original jail from the twin towers, as they are now called, I came unexpectedly upon a young man dressed in grey washpants and a white T-shirt and sitting on the curb. When he saw me, he jumped to his feet and asked me for some money. He had just been released from jail, he said, with only the clothes on his back and no idea of what to do or where to go. I found this implausible. Surely, I thought, the authorities would not be so foolish as to release a convicted criminal penniless onto the street. But the man had not been panhandling when I almost literally stepped on him. A skinny, crewcut white guy with a couple of teeth knocked out, he was sitting disconsolately alone with his feet in the gutter of a street that had at that hour neither vehicular nor pedestrian traffic. I gave him ten dollars.

A few years later, when a Mexican high school student whom I had tutored was imprisoned on a drug offense and then released in Northern California, I learned that what I had observed that afternoon in Los Angeles was pretty close to standard practice. I also learned, after doing a little archival research, that an alliance of Mexican and Chinese neighborhood people had fought hard against the expansion of County Jail. Understandably, they did not like having homeless, penniless ex-cons turned loose on the streets where they lived. As you will have inferred, they lost that battle. You can fight city hall, but it takes more money to win than they had.

A Christian who does not know where the jails of his town are located would seem to be, in short, not much of a Christian. On judgment day, what can he expect to hear if not the voice of his Lord saying, "I was in prison, and you did not visit me"? And to repeat something I said earlier, if we do not even know where our prisons are located, how can we begin to know how prisoners are treated behind their locked doors?

Over the past two weeks, as the atrocious abuse of Iraqi prisoners by the American military has come to light, President George W. Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld have been at pains to proclaim that this depravity is not what America is all about. Clearly, it is not what American ideals are all about. But at the level of performance rather than ideals, we must ask whether our treatment of prisoners in Iraq does not, after all, give the world a valid glimpse of how prisoners are treated in America and thereby of America itself.

The late Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a Christian but a great student of Islam, once commented that adherents to any religion typically compare the ideal form of that religion with the actual performance of other religions. The instinct to direct rational analysis toward the other rather than the self is very deep within us. I was appalled but fascinated to read of the use of magnetic resonance imaging of the brain by advertising agencies testing political commercials. It seems that when we consider the other party's candidate, our dorsolateral prefrontal cortex lights up—that is, the part of the brain associated with rationality. But when we consider our party's candidate, it is the ventromedial prefrontal cortex that lights up, a part of the brain associated with emotion.[1]

Something like this hard-wired tendency toward a double standard surely affects the degree to which we read the facts of the Abu Ghraib scandal as clues to any larger truth about the United States.

After the Iraqi prisoner scandal broke, Fox Butterfield, a New York Times reporter who has made prisons something of a specialty, wrote one of the briefest but, in my opinion, most telling articles yet published on

---

[1] John Tierney, "Using M.R.I.'s to See Politics on the Brain," *New York Times,* April 20, 2004.

the scandal under the title "Mistreatment of Prisoners Is Called Routine in U.S." Its opening two paragraphs read as follows:

> Physical and sexual abuse of prisoners, similar to what has been uncovered in Iraq, takes place in American prisons with little public knowledge or concern, according to corrections officials, inmates and human rights advocates.
>
> In Pennsylvania and some other states, inmates are routinely stripped in front of other inmates before being moved to a new prison or a new unit within their prison. In Arizona, male inmates at the Maricopa County jail in Phoenix are made to wear women's pink underwear as a form of humiliation.[2]

If, after the Abu Ghraib scandal, the world has begun to wonder whether Americans treat their prisoners at home the way they treat them abroad, the world's curiosity may not entirely misplaced. Abuse of prisoners is particularly widespread in Texas, Butterfield reports, but here in Los Angeles a prisoner allegedly under witness protection while in custody was slain at County Jail within the past month by a man he had testified against. Within the past seven months, there have been five murders at the jail. In one case, the victim was stabbed thirty-six times, his body not found for sixteen hours. In another, the victim died of multiple stab wounds during a riot involving as many as 200 inmates. A third inmate survived a face-slashing attack that required 200 stitches. The president of the Los Angeles County Professional Peace Officers Association reports that the jail has become increasingly dangerous for the guards as well as the inmates. As at Abu Ghraib, inadequate budgets have meant shrinking staffs for the staggering 18,000 prisoners held in Los Angeles County facilities.[3] As at Abu Ghraib, inadequate staffs have resulted in a growing

---

[2] Fox Butterfield, "Mistreatment of Prisons Is Called Routine in U.S.," *New York Times,* May 8, 2004.

[3] Andrew Blankstein, "Suspect in Witness' Death Roamed Jail for Hours," *Los Angeles Times,* May 12, 2004. Sue Fox, Richard Winton, and Andrew Blankstein, "Lapses at Jail Led to Inmate's Killing," *Los Angeles Times,* May 15, 2004. See also a story published after the first version of this paper was delivered: Richard Winton and Andrew Blankstein, "Panel to Probe Slayings at Jail," *Los Angeles Times,* May 19, 2004.

risk of anarchy and violence. American prisons are certainly not the only lens through which to view America, but they are, I submit, one valid lens among the many—as if to say, "Show me how your country treats its prisoners, and I will tell you what kind of country you are."

William Lawson, the man who first alerted CBS to the existence of the now infamous photographs, did not begin with television. Before making that move, he had tried and failed seventeen times, with seventeen different members of Congress, to get our government to address this ongoing atrocity.[4] But both at home and abroad, the cause of prisoner rights is a cause without a constituency. No one ever won an election campaigning for more humane treatment of convicted or suspected criminals, or even detainees held completely without criminal charge—like the 70-90% at Abu Ghraib who were arrested by mistake and eventually released without charge.[5]

At Abu Ghraib, at Guantanamo, at several other little known or completely secret places around the world, and in an archipelago of obscure holding pens for illegal immigrants to the United States, tens of thousands of men and women are being held without charge and without term.[6] Are these unfortunates—typically called detainees rather than prisoners—my neighbor? Ethically, do I owe them anything? As a worshipper of the God who warned, "I was in prison and you did not visit me," I must believe that I do owe them something, but I am still struggling to determine what it is. I would be happy to let the whole thing slide with a sigh of dismissal. Nothing could be more natural, more "philosophical," than that, but nothing would be less Christian. I don't like prisoners any more than the next guy does, but are they my neighbors? Yes, unfortunately, inconveniently, they are.

---

[4] James Dao and Eric Lichtblau, "Soldier's Family Set in Motion Chain of Events on Disclosure," *New York Times,* May 8, 2004.

[5] "Red Cross Report Describes Abuse in Iraq," Associated Press, May 10, 2004.

[6] Cf. Mark Dow, *American Gulag: Inside U.S. Immigration Prisons.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).