

# FOREWORD

by PHILIP POTTER

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It is with deep gratitude and humility that I recommend this uniquely significant book: gratitude, that it has been possible for a courageous group of people legally to make use of records of Brazilian military courts dating from April 1964 to March 1979, to put before the public an account of the tragic practice of torture during a particularly eventful period of the history of the world and of Brazil; humility, because I, like all readers, share a common humanity with the tortured and the torturers, and, share too in the suffering and the guilt of those who were caught up in this degrading violation of our human nature.

I write as one who has been involved for nearly forty years in the ecumenical movement, which has always given prominence to the promotion of human rights and of the inviolable dignity of the human person. When the World Council of Churches (a fellowship of over three hundred Orthodox, Protestant, and Pentecostal churches in more than one hundred countries) was officially inaugurated in 1948, it made a clear declaration of human rights:

We affirm that all men are equal in the sight of God and that the rights of men derive directly from their status as the children of God. It is presumptuous for the state to assume that it can grant or deny fundamental rights. It is for the state to embody these rights in its own legal system and to ensure their observance in practice. . . . We are profoundly concerned about evidence from many parts of the world of flagrant violations of human rights. Both individuals and groups are subjected to persecution and discrimination on grounds of race, colour, religion or political conviction. Against such actions, whether of governments, officials, or the general public, the churches must take a firm and vigorous stand, through local

action, in co-operation with churches in other lands, and through international institutions of legal order. They must work for an ever wider and deeper understanding of what are the essential human rights if men are to be free to do the will of God.

The inaugural assembly also called upon churches to press for the adoption by the United Nations of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which in fact was done on 10 December of that same year. Indeed, leaders of member churches of the World Council of Churches (WCC) participated in drafting this declaration. Article 5 of the Declaration categorically said: "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."

In 1964 we hoped to hold the general committee meeting of the World Student Christian Federation, of which I was then president, in Brazil. Unhappily, the military coup that took place on 1 April 1964 forced us to meet in a neighboring country. We were and continued to be concerned about the fate of students, professors, and intellectuals who had been challenging the political, economic, and social system imposed by the new regime and who were subject to summary imprisonment and torture. During the years when I was director of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (1967–72) and general secretary (1972–84) of the WCC, I was deeply engaged in the issue of human rights. At our Fourth Assembly in 1968 we drew attention to the international character of human rights:

Violations of human rights in one place may be quickly communicated to all, spreading an evil and destructive influence abroad. Nations should recognise that the protection of fundamental human rights and freedoms has now become a common concern of the whole international community, and should therefore not regard international concern for the implementation of these rights as an unwarranted interference.

It was in this spirit that appeals were made to the Brazilian authorities and to the world about what was happening in Brazil and elsewhere.

Of the many violations of human rights, why is torture singled out for attention by the international community, and why are Christians so concerned about it? First, torture is the most cruel and

barbarous crime against the human person. Traditionally it has been argued—both by the ancient Greeks and Romans in relation to slaves and by the medieval Church in relation to what were called heretics—that torture was a means of forcing people to speak the truth. The reality today is that with the highly sophisticated instruments not only of physical but of mental tortures, it is possible to break the spirit of people and make them admit to whatever the torturer suggests. The intention is to reduce people to functional machines. The ultimate consequence of this is the phenomenon of our time: people disappear as though they had never existed. This is the very denial of our God-given human identity, contrary to the will and act of our creator. What is particularly intolerable today is that at a time when most peoples subscribe to the recognition and maintenance of human rights and the dignity of the human being, these rights are being most flagrantly suppressed and violated all over the world.

Second, because the torturers are willing agents in this degrading act, there must be overriding motives that drive them to act in this way to others. Invariably, it is in obedience to some tyrant or in the name of national security. In the pursuit of rapid economic development, a military regime assumes exceptional powers and dispenses with the constitutional rights of the citizen. These exceptional measures in fact bring greater hardship to the vast majority of the population. It is precisely those who raise their voices or act for the poor and oppressed who have been subject to torture and death. As Christians, we believe that the only national security worthy of its name lies in enabling people to participate fully in the life of their nation. It is only when there is real dialogue, a sharing of life with life in mutual trust and respect between people at all levels of society, that there can be true national security.

Third, the practice of torture is an indication of the inherited values that influence a society or nation. What has happened in Brazil has to be seen in the light of its long history since 1500 when the first colonists came. The treatment of Indians, the cruel institution of slavery that was abolished only in 1888, and the violent way in which Brazil was exploited over the centuries—all these have left their mark on the mentality of the people, and especially on the ruling classes. Unfortunately, the time of colonization was also the time of the Inquisition by the Church, which was therefore inhibited, in its evangelistic work, from disseminating the value of

human dignity and justice for all. However, in the last thirty years or so, Christians have become aware of the need to awaken people's consciousness to promote respect for all persons and a more just society. This book is, therefore, an appeal to rethink traditional attitudes and values.

Fourth, torture is a concern for Christians and for all people of goodwill because it involves so many countries. That involvement takes many forms, beginning with the export of sinister instruments of torture and of police and prison hardware. Even more important is the economic and military involvement of countries where security is based on the control of the working population. This book is not only about one country, but about the whole community of nations. We are all responsible for what happened in Brazil.

It is in penitence and humility that we approach this book. It is not intended to be primarily an indictment, but rather an invitation to us all to discern our true being through the disfigured faces of the tortured and crucified so that we may have life in all its fullness. On the cross Jesus prayed for his torturers: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It was this Jesus who spoke to his disciples, as he does to us: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." And that truth is known and done in being just and in affirming the dignity of every human being.

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