NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Let's examine the national conscience before moving on

Joan Chittister | Sep. 24, 2009 From Where I Stand

At the University of Birmingham in England in the 1980s, I heard a British journalist argue passionately that "Americans make mistakes, yes, but they always examine them and admit them and correct them." The debate hinged on the question of whether or not U.S. motives behind the installation of Cruise missiles in Europe were really meant to defend Europe from Soviet aggression or, more likely, to make sure that U.S. wars would be fought on European soil.

The journalist cited Vietnam and this country's self flagellation over the massacre at May Lai and the napalming of villages as his proof of US commitment to hew the higher path, to expose the truth above all else, however painful those findings might be to the national psyche. "We, on the other hand," he concluded somewhat mournfully, "simply deny things and go on."

It is always electrifying, often sobering, to hear yourself described through the eyes of the other. I remember, hearing him, being deeply moved at the thought that I came from a country that could be perceived like that. But times change. Too often then, the truth seems less cleansing, repentance less noble, national forgetfulness more useful.

I find myself wondering where that journalist is these days and what he might be saying about us now. This time it's we who are deciding whether to seek the truth and repent it or simply deny it and go on.

Last month Attorney General Eric Holder announced the appointment of John Durham as Special Prosecutor whose brief it is to determine whether U.S. CIA agents transgressed federal law in the choice of interrogation techniques used on terror suspects.

It's a situation which, at first sight, seems to confirm everything the British journalist said: Having been made aware of possible atrocities of U.S. personnel in the investigation of suspected terrorists, the government is racing to unmask such behavior, to punish it and to correct it.

But not so fast.

The president, rather than claiming moral outrage, has made it clear that he would rather "put it behind us and go on." Which is, at best, a questionable precedent to set. A position like that can surely be taken in the future to mean that anything we can get away with in times to come will be fine as long as we stop it when it's discovered and get on with the next chapter in U.S. history. The one right after the massacre of Native Americans or the enslavement of blacks, for instance.

More than that, former Vice President Dick Cheney, considered by many to have been chief architect of the "enhanced" interrogation policies put in place during the Bush administration, dismisses the whole process as "a political act" and does not "promise" to participate. Promise? Pardon me?

Finally, a compromise has apparently been reached which assures those who were involved in the program that

only those who went further in their interrogation techniques than the Bush administration's new policies allowed would be prosecuted. It will not, in other words, be a real investigation of the creeping collapse of US military standards during war time.

The truth is that there are other questions -- questions under the questions of interrogation techniques -- that this kind of a process ignores but which may have more to do with the moral state and international integrity of this nation than any amount of useless information ever will.

What happened, for instance, to the Nuremberg Principles -- created by us, incidentally -- that rejected the "I-was-only-following-orders" defense contrary to the demands of conscience or the boundaries of international law?

What about the morality of torture itself? If it's right now, was it not also right during the Inquisition? And if not, when does wrong become right? When it "works"? As in, breaks human beings into sniveling, groveling, catatonic imitations of human beings?

Is torture really effective? Is the amount of valid information it yields worth the degree of inhumanity it takes to get it? What does science say about the reliability of such data? (See Commentary: Cheney wrong on interrogations [1])

What about the very definition of torture? What about its acceptance as a universally accepted international standard of human rights during wartime? What kind of a country do we want to be?

Without a long, sincere, open conversation about these core issues, what can an investigation of whether torturers exceeded the amount of torture legally prescribed by any one administration possibly resolve? That a little bit of murder, a little bit of inhumanity, a little bit of barbarity is all right if we say it is -- and as long as it's our murders and our inhumanity we're evaluating?

How can the community of nations ever function as a community under these circumstances? We have argued for years whether not just one but two distinct and equally savage atomic bombs were necessary to end World War II. The argument in favor always leans for its justification on the notion that more U.S. soldiers would have been lost otherwise. No official argument, however, turned on whether or not the targeting of an entire civilian population was either necessary or moral.

Can we leave such questions out of the discussion and be civilized at all?

Maybe it is precisely the fact that we have yet to deal honestly and openly with those questions that has brought us finally down the slippery slope to this one.

It seems clear that we are not now doing what the British journalist found so morally refreshing about us. When we excoriated ourselves for napalming civilians and massacring whole villages in Vietnam we changed the policies that encouraged such things; we purged the American soul of its sense of self-righteousness.

From where I stand, it looks now as if we may simply be pretending to be concerned about the soul of this nation so we can quietly join the crowd that "simply denies things and goes on." But if that is the case, more than the erosion of U.S. integrity will be unmasked. Then we will have to deal with whatever it is in us as a people that professes to be intent on restoring America's place in the world and then ignores what it will take to do it.

Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a best-selling author and international lecturer on topics of justice, peace, human rights, women?s issues, and contemporary spirituality in the church and in society.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/19/2013 - 13:55*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/where-i-stand/lets-examine-national-conscience-moving

Links:
[1] http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/08/31/bergen.cheney/index.html?iref=newssearch