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Christian Morality In Iraq
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One of the most perplexing aspects of the scandal at the Abu Ghraib Prison, in which American soldiers abused and molested Iraqi prisoners, is the apparent disconnect between official statements about "what went wrong" and what average Americans think is the obvious answer to the question.

Army generals and other officials have blamed the abuse on a "breakdown in command," a lack of knowledge about the Geneva Convention, "poor training," and even inadequate supervision. But the average American looks at the actions through ethical eyes. Who cares about training and command? This kind of treatment is so obviously morally wrong that the soldiers ordered to do it should have refused rather than treat fellow human beings in such a sinful manner. Most of us still cannot understand why good American young men and women, some of them Christians, would behave in this manner.

One answer lies in their location, namely, the soldiers are not in the United States; they are not even in Europe. Not only can they not speak the language, Americans cannot even read the road signs (which are written in non-European characters). They are not in a Christian country, where at least they might see the occasional church, hear someone speak about Jesus, or use the Christian calendar (Sunday is just another day in Iraq). And few of them ever learned anything about Iraqi, or even Arab, culture before they left. Almost nothing in Iraq would be familiar to a young soldier from America.

What happens to people when they leave the society in which they have lived all their lives and enter another one to which they can make almost no identifiable connections? They of course begin by feeling extremely uncomfortable. The foreign society repels them and they turn inward to those with whom they share social and cultural bonds. As these ties strengthen, they get redefined. The familiar ethical rules apply only to those within the social boundaries. The members of the foreign society are seen as beyond the bounds, beyond the application of any shared ethical principles.

In the end, the American soldiers identify with each other, as the extension of the culture back home. The people around them are not seen as people, but more as intelligent animals. They are not "neighbors," to whom ethical principles apply, but rather are mere "creatures." No action against them can be classed as a sin because they are not people. Of course, this extreme characterization applies only to a very few soldiers, but it does explain the immoral atrocities that were committed at Abu Ghraib.

There is an earlier time when Christian soldiers invaded Muslim lands and committed atrocities. This was during the Crusades, starting in the 11th century, when soldiers were sent out to "wrest the Holy Land from the infidel Mohammedans." Promised entry into heaven if killed in battle, these soldiers assumed they could do no wrong. They killed innocent men, women and children (often Christians and Jews), raped, pillaged and plundered. Some even ate their human victims. When they ventured out of their known territory, these knights and soldiers entered lands in which they thought the ethical rules that governed their behavior at home no longer applied. The atrocities they committed are still remembered almost a millennium later.

The American Army is certainly not marching under the Crusaders' "Sign of the Cross," but it did enter Iraq as the harbinger of justice, democracy and freedom. The soldiers at Abu Ghraib have instead shown American actions as ones of tyranny and torture. Can America move beyond this ethical atrocity to accomplish its goal of liberation? I hope so. Otherwise, these abuses may be remembered for another millennium.