

Episode 172 - Dr. William Wipfler: Human Rights and Torture (part 2 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate we connect. We care. We're in social work. Hi from Buffalo. Sunday afternoons in July August can be spent on the steps Juan of the Allbright Knox art gallery in Delaware Park Jazz At The Allbright Knox is the nation's longest running free jazz festival. Bring your blanket and picnic basket and relax buffaloes summer right. I'm Peter Sobota in our second episode with Dr. William Wipfler for he continues his discussion of human rights by detailing the assumptions and root causes that drive immigration to the United States. He describes who's coming and why and the unintended consequence of U.S. policy. Dr. Wipfler we're concludes by discussing what motivates him to persevere in a long struggle and offers advice for others interested in promoting human rights and justice the Reverend Canon William Wipfler Ph.D. DD has served as a priest missionary human rights advocate and scholar working in more than 80 nations throughout the world from more than 60 years. In addition to his missionary human rights work Dr. Wipfler has authored or coauthored seven books on human rights church history Latin America and edited the NCC Latin America newsletter and human rights perspective as well as a collection of statements on human rights and justice by official Anglican provinces and agencies for service and human rights advocacy.

[00:02:04] Dr. Wipfler has earned awards and recognition from organizations such as the United Nations and the governments of Chile and Brazil Dr. Wipfler was interviewed by our own Stephanie Sacco a current MSW student and graduate assistant for global initiatives here at the School of Social Work. Stephanie interviewed Dr. Wipfler in April of 2015. I want to ask you more specifically about the root causes. You talked a little bit about the root causes of the militarization of governments and some of the torture and other human rights violations. I'm interested in hearing more about the root causes as immigrant and refugee populations that we are now seeing coming to the United States which is causing a whole other issue. I know you've been very interested in a lot of work on immigration right. But before we even get to that the root cause is what is causing these people to flee. I think in many cases most heinous things happened during the period following the Second World War onward that have created social disarray and really terrible problems in terms of the way borders when that the victor always has this attitude that they can create new boundaries I think and over and over again the situation has arisen where if for a full two decades or more a particular attitude has persisted for example in the 21 republics of the Caribbean's Central America and South America there was this attitude that there is a total war against communism. This is what the beginning created. We have to be prepared to meet the enemy the Communist Cuba has fallen. January 1st 1959 we have to prepare for the domino effect as Cuba goes so we'll Latin America.

[00:04:21] And so we double up on the way in which we see democracy in quotes being preserved and we overreact and we do something that we were preparing ourselves from very early. Give me one example because it's true. You know the places outside of the Americas before the School of the Americas was even foreign to treaties were signed with the countries of Latin America. They were mutual defense treaties. They were signed in the late 40s because the United States was fearful of and rightly so of the power of the Soviet Union. And what was occurring in the Soviets we the communist sphere but the fact is that they went overboard. They did prepare well in advance for dealing with Latin American militaries but then the school of the Americas which was established in the early 50s trained all of these militaries of Latin America in the concept of Total War. And in a sense we're suggesting that Soviet governments were untrustworthy because they didn't understand how to carry on a total war. This was part of the School of the Americas indoctrination.

It was national security strategy. It was called the National Security Doctrine and it was an attempt to point out how standing together the militaries can keep Cuba from happening. The domino theory. Well there is a different domino theory that occurred. And that is all of the countries fell to military governments which lasted for two three decades. What does this mean. This means that the perspectives that were present altered the social order in most cases in the Americas democracy was even though you had these petty dictators and so on. People understood democracy.

[00:06:28] Argentina had a democratic system. Chile had a democratic system. Brazil Piru right. They were all countries that understood elections had elections. But with the prodding of the United States and with the provision of now a new ideology. Unlike the past military governments came into being with the idea they remain in the old way. You had a pretty dictator. The Army saw that it was his behavior it was creating disturbance and social unrest other things and so the military would intervene. They'd find somebody else to stick into the presidency and they would withdraw. They didn't run the government. They may have backed it but it wasn't a military that ran the government. Now and again a general grant but he was running the government as a petty dictator maybe. But there were things that he couldn't do because there were safeguards after this process is underway when the military takeover they don't replace the civilian president that they threw out. They put up one of their own in charge of the country. General Pinochet in Chile a general or an admiral in Argentina a general in Brazil. So country by country you have a military concept as the backbone and virtually every person who took power was undergirded by a cabinet and trade was an officer trained at the School of the Americas. I think that's a very important fact of history.

[00:08:17] So now if this difficulty if people are leaving some of these countries and that all started very late the 1980s when the crisis began in Central America from which most of the refugees are now coming to civil disorder breakdown of social society and so it occurred in the midst of civil wars. The only country that escaped because Costa Rica Guatemala was under a military dictatorship El Salvador Honduras Panama Nicaragua. Civil war intervened by the United States providing the contrast with the old National Guard by the way. So you have this terrible social problem and then you're having your war work and coming to the end of the war on drugs and basically the United States turns to police departments and militaries in the countries where the war on drugs is going on and in most cases the military are very inefficient or they're on the take. And what you have for example is an immigration law that makes it exceedingly difficult unless you are being persecuted directly by the government fear for your life to get permission to come to the United States. And that's why we get border runners. That's why so many refugees come across at the risk of life and limb to try to get into the United States because of the danger to themselves that they find in their own country. They are fearful. A question that came to mind. Why is this concept of the United States policies their intended impact and the actual implications the actual outcome of the policies. Talking about the policy of the border and the wall that they know the fences and everything they've created those spaces that they leave that they realize that this was where people were going to be coming across the most dangerous parts. Like you said with the wife and limb.

[00:10:27] What is your thought on how policies are being created and the level of awareness of the actual implications and outcomes of those policies and perhaps the break in the cycle of feedback from what happens as a result of the policy too. Any chance that we would like to see the policy. I I think that one of the real things that bothered me the most is that that the Senate passed a couple of years ago and a bipartisan bill that passed without any real problems to being passed on immigration reform. It's not a perfect bill. It's an important bill. It's important because I guess the best way to describe it is it's a humanitarian approach not satisfactory in every way. And I think that the fact of that bill is something that the president decided had to be put into effect regardless. There's a hue and cry right now oh he's using executive power. What he's doing is really he has taken that Senate bill and he's trying to fulfill what is in a way an already passed bipartisan bill which the speaker of the House refuses even to bring up to a vote because if hearing is it will pass.

And so for political reasons the speaker of the House does not want to allow it to come up because it will be a successful vote. So it would be bipartisan. There are enough Republicans who would vote with the Democrats for it to happen but they're not allowing it to happen. And the result is that you're getting. I think the example that you raise is a very important example. You have miles and miles of fence you have miles and miles of vehicle. These places where vehicles can go through they're just impenetrable.

[00:12:32] But what they have done is purposely because traveling through that area is so dangerous it's desert and mountainous country. They've left gaps in the fence and yet in spite of knowing what's ahead and the dangers immigrants cross at those points and children are among them that the numbers of children have gone up to 60 some thousand a year who come to the border and are turned away but many get across and they go through a desert that is the almost impenetrable there have been over the last I it's seven years eight years. There have been around six thousand plus bodies in the desert and they know there are many more in the desert in mountains that they've not found. In addition while the animals weather conditions leave no remains and I think that the American people are behind a reasonable immigration bill being passed there's no question about it. But there is a lot of propaganda that is put forward. That's totally false about the impact of illegal immigrants on the American economy. They take more out than they put in. They don't offer anything because they're all undereducated they are third rate people etc. etc.. The fact is that the statistics are absolutely the opposite of that. They truly do put more money into the U.S. economy than they take out the benefits. The issue is if they are productive people there have to be some changes in the law so that they are people who can become citizens and not have to go back to their countries to make that application if they are already working in jobs and are paying taxes they pay an enormous amount of taxes they have withholding they pay Social Security.

[00:14:39] Those who work the ones who don't work place less of a demand on the social services than citizens who are not working place on the social services. So I think that somewhere along the way the Fables have to be passed by for people who are human beings who may have come to this country illegally but who have been giving to the community everybody thinks of it as wetbacks to use the nasty phrase as Mexicans swimming across that river. But the fact of the matter is many of those who have not gotten their papers in order are very productive people. They give to their communities more than they take away. And I think that has to be taken into account and the media has to do a little bit more of its own research and not fall in with the nasty speeches by I believe uninformed members of Congress or people who are of a particular political battle that they want to create and see what the real statistics are about those who are here. This leads me to wonder how did we get to this place where we are so uninformed and where people see that it is a political advantage to them to prevent something like this immigration reform bill from passing. Why is it so. And what do you imagine can be done. I hear you saying you know the media are changing how they're presenting the argument but how do we even get to this place. Well I'll be very honest. I think that it is two things. And I think racism is a big part of that.

[00:16:25] No one complains about the fact that great grandma and great grandpa or grandma and grandpa or mom and dad came into the United States perhaps during that incredible amount of western eastern and central European country between about 18 23 and then right up to the beginning of the Second World War. My grandparents came not because they were fearful of our government. They came because crops had failed in Germany as in Ireland as in Spain as in Italy. It was a terrible period of time of drought and so around 1844 and revolutions were occurring largely because people. There was unrest was strikes people who were demanding food. And so our grandparents and great grandparents came here not because they were persecuted by the government they wanted a better life. And that is the big wave of entry into the United States. We're willing to have Polish and German and British and Czechoslovakia and Irish. It strikes me we don't find any fault with that infestation of all those foreigners. They were all white. Well the Italians are

a little tan and the Spaniards well they're responsible for all those Mexican people you know abroad. But basically the people who make the most money are the people who feel that that was OK that immigration was great. The millions who came because like me they were my grandfather and grandmother or my great grandfather and grandmother. But these other people and we forget that we took away a third of the land of those other people and they're badly mismatched more. And as part of the treaty they had to give up California Arizona Nevada Texas New Mexico. That was their land. We did something similar to the Native Americans.

[00:18:39] So when people are saying those people I'm sure are referring to their great grandparents I think they're referring to those people who go look like them who are on their borders and in many cases a lot of people are people from who the biggest land grab in history apart from some of the things that happened in the Soviet Union and China the biggest land grab in history. So I believe we are we need to see our own history and that's a piece of the problem. So on the topic of people coming across the border and I heard you mention the children that are coming across could you speak more about why they're coming who they are and what's happening to them. I think that we have to go back always to the question of what was occurring in Central America is mainly where the pressures are coming from. Now when the countries of South America were recovering their political stability got rid of their military governments and began to deal with the realities of democracy. They flow virtually stopped from those countries that the professionals still would like to be part of. Some of the structures that are here there are those who want to get an education here. They go through real methods to do. They become. They get an educational visa or whatever it may be they do it legally. But there are some things that are happening still. The reverberations are very powerful in Central America in Guatemala Honduras Nicaragua and El Salvador and that's where most of the push is coming from. And Mexico of course with the push is coming from across the border.

[00:20:39] The tragedy is that because of certain circumstances parents are willing to either have their kids go with the Quijote thing which is the guy who takes money to try to get them across the border and so on well they risk their lives to either themselves. And it is because of the circumstances in their own country it's very hard to prove that they fear for their lives. I'll give you an example. El Salvador which had its civil war up until the end of the 80s and the Reagan administration I must say. And into the 90s the situation was such that when the war war ended we were doing such a bad job in restraining the Mexican drug trade that it took up home in gangs in El Salvador gangs that had never existed before the conflict. Adolescence at the onset of adolescence. Every kid is confronted with the choice of what gang he or she is going to join. And it could be a life decision if you won't join the gang. Your life is in danger if you join the gang you are part of the drug trade you are part of gang wars and so many of the youngsters who leave Guatemala Honduras El Salvador not so much the ones from Nicaragua but those really are doing it because their parents are truly and deeply concerned about the life of that child. But to prove that your life is in danger. Our laws require virtually a newspaper article about the fact you are threatened or some proof in some way and for example in yes. I last figures I have over 2000 fiscal year July of 2013 to June of 2014.

[00:22:38] Sixty five thousand unaccompanied minors appeared at the gates of the U.S. and we don't know how many. That's well along the border. We don't know how many actually made it to cross and get into the desert. And these are kids as young as eight and nine and they're traveling alone. And if parents allow it and want it and if the children are willing to face it there is some question about life and survival and endangerment and threat that will let them take that serious journey of 14 15 hundred miles to the border from where they live and then facing the dangers across the border in the desert. The lack of water the heat the dangers of the desert scorpions and rattlesnakes and everything else that's there or the mountains that the only two choices they have those are the gaps in the fence and yet they'll take the risk and I think that we have to have a far more enlightened policy when it comes to children. And so I think that we are in urgent need of

opening our eyes. 17 percent. Well it goes from 66 to 71 percent depending on who has done the survey of the American people are in favor of an improved immigration law that many people. I mean just like capital punishment there are so many other things where the people are in a position that is over against the politician and yet they're supposed to be representing our people. So moving forward how do we change that. I think. But what I remember during the 60s and 70s when we were having the biggest struggle since the 70s and 80s we were the biggest struggle about human rights. My congressman congresswoman was all still having town hall meetings.

[00:24:49] The person in my district was always very upset when I appeared because I took him off the stated thing he was going to be speaking about you know the questions I put my hand up. He couldn't go on for the entire session. And I raised with him some real issues and he had to answer them. We were friends and he used to laugh when we were out of the session and he would say oh I dread it when you come in because you ask all the questions for which I can't give any answers since my voting pattern doesn't quite fit your questions. He was very honest very honest. But the fact of the matter is he had face to face meetings with people who could raise the questions real townhall meeting. I hardly see an advertisement these days anywhere from town hall meetings all electioneering is done on television radio and in the press and not facing the electorate. The great majority but there are some who still do it. Then there are some who opened up the radio program that there are four questions that come from people but they are always screened by the people who get the call to find out what it is you want to ask about. So there is a biased screening all of the questions don't get through. But in the days of the town hall you had a sense that your representative at least heard your questions may not agree with you but those were put out in front of the whole public and you had a chance to also have a constituency. Now it is all mass media.

[00:26:34] It cost millions for each campaign and most congresspeople senators or representatives don't have to face their electorate. We talk about it but it doesn't happen. And I think that election reform with standard amounts of money being granted from public funds for any campaign that may be occurring is the only way to go because of great difficulty now is money is speech. That's what the Supreme Court says. And actually yes money is speech but that means Zed's that is not the kind of speech you get when a member of the Congress there are members of the Congress who rarely ever face their constituencies the way they do it is letters to their constituents. That's all their opinions out there you know or if they're a candidate running the race is really a public thing. It's all these ads. And you can always test the truth of the ads that they put out and try saying hand in hand with immigration reform. There has to be election reform has to be some standards that we recover. There are so many senators and members of the House who are always talking about the Constitution. But the fact of the matter is that the spirit of the constitution is really being negated by television radio and newspapers being the substitute. And you can't tell me Oh but there's the Internet because the number of people who turn to those kinds of things in the Internet are really very small in comparison to those who turn on the tube at night or the radio in their car or pick up a newspaper now and then. So there's no dialogue with the people who are supposed to be representing us in the Congress.

[00:28:30] And I think that frankly I am so glad that we have that one word at the front of that statement. It is human rights not American rights. Those are built into laws some other way. But this is a recognition of what all of human beings deserve simply because they are human beings and that there has to be work toward changing and moderating the moving developing of societies and the interactions between those societies. So the good things that lead to the exercise of human rights the action with human rights is a fact and that if someone's rights are denied they do impact me in a whole variety of ways. And I believe that we've got to open our hearts and our eyes to see that we've tried over the last decades to deal with things like male privilege and I mean we have a long way to go to deal with human privilege to get that more universal sense that I deal with you. Not because you are Protestant or Catholic Hindu or Muslim or because you are white or black or brown

or yellow. I agree with you because you are a human being on this earth and I agree that there is such a thing as human rights and it applies to everyone and as long as somebody is being denied that then I can't be comfortable with the rights and privileges that I know I have that makes me want to ask you about. What is it that motivates you to doing your work to keep moving. And I see sort of a personal approach to the work that you have done but you've faced so many obstacles.

[00:30:28] When I went to high school there was a teacher in high school I went to Brooklyn Tech. I was studying mostly physics but I discovered history because I had to take English history into the basic courses in addition to all the technical engineering stuff. And this guy made me understand what history was so when I got through my professional training and finished seminary I decided I wanted to go overseas. I wanted to be a missionary and I wanted to take what I knew and share on the I found out that I went and I learned more from the people who I worked with than I did anything I could give them. And I think that has always been a piece of the human rights question I saw and felt and what people in my parish in the Dominican Republic were going through. I knew what the heavy hand of the dictator was like. I almost suffered from it myself. And when I went to the National Council of Churches after my two and a half years in custody after the Dominican Republic I asked the boss I was the assistant director. I asked if I could begin to pick up on some of the human rights issues. And he said Please do. And I did. And that was the way. And once I started I realized that if there is not just this element in all of this then you don't have a ground to stand on. The Justice element has to be part.

[00:32:07] Final question I'd like to ask you what would be your advice to anyone who is interested in carrying on with some of the work that you've done who's interested in getting involved on the micro level the macro level whatever in whatever way they can to advocate for human rights. I don't think there's any professional amateur educational arena in which people social arena in which people function and live. And in a sense have they're being sometimes even exercising their bliss where the issue of justice and human rights he seems kind of there or at the edge of it or just out beyond your in the social work department here at the university. I think that unfortunately social workers very often will deal with people as clients. That's the word that's used and not as needy but needy. Not in the sense of the beggar but needy in the sense of support. And the human piece of that support that you or anyone who's engaged in that discipline can provide. I don't care if you're in a camp. There are things that you do just by being with people that respect their dignity and rights that are an expansion of their personhood or a closure of that person. Social workers in particular have to be exactly what they are meant to be and that is not just somebody who helps people fill out forms or someone who goes and visits or find out of the state of needs or follow up for medical treatment. They're dealing with human beings and everyone can help someone else discover their dignity. So I think that we can weigh the places where we work or study or have our moments of recreation without realizing that there are people there who have pain who have needs or have desires to be seen as human beings.

[00:34:36] And so the words human rights and human beings just fit together. They are something that unfortunately in our time are not built in to the whole process of who we are becoming. My mother would not my father will not let me forget that I am not only for myself I am going to be for other people. And so if I got into it it was natural because of the fact that they help me see more about humanity than I probably. It was fortunate for me that I lived in the Depression was born in the Depression and they knew how to respond to the sadnesses of other people because of their past. Thank you for taking the time to be with me today it's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you for inviting me. You've been listening to Dr. William Wipfler discuss human rights on in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our online and on ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu.

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