

CITIZENSHIP AND SERVICE

“In The Name Of God”

Eric Brooks

Although religion is commonly used to bring us together and foster a sense of peace, it often times drives a spike of division between us. An example of this can currently be seen in the Middle East, where a holy war of sorts is taking place and religion is being abused by both sides in order to further their nefarious objectives. In texts such as Fredrick Douglass' *Narrative* and Philip Gourevitch's story of the Rwandan genocide, we can observe that this type of religious persecution is taking place all over the world. Though it may be easy to identify, however, it was and will continue to be hard to stop. In order to commit acts of terrible consequence, people use God's word as an excuse to carry them out, and the problem is only growing bigger.

In Fredrick Douglass' *Narrative*, he describes what it is like to be an American slave living on a Maryland plantation. Understandably, the life that he was forced to lead was a very difficult one, and he had to suffer everyday just to survive. But in one particularly moving scene in the novel, it wasn't Douglass who was suffering, but yet a fellow slave who was taking the beating. His master, a self-proclaimed Methodist class leader, took it upon himself to start quoting Bible verses to justify his

wrath. “He that knoweth his master’s will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.” (115). Douglass then goes on to explain why the slave holders used this as an excuse: “The preachers say to the slaves they should obey their masters, because God commands it, and because their happiness depended on it.” (115). This is a case of an extreme use of the Bible and the pro-slavery argument is nothing without it. As times changed, people started to question slavery, but the slave holders knew no one would question God, so they used the God’s word to explain their position on slavery. Using God as a defense to justify something like slavery is not acceptable and it is sad to see that someone would twist God’s word in such a perverse way.

Regrettably, this is not the only occasion that God’s word was used to cause harm to others. But in Rwanda’s case, it was a much more severe crime. Philip Gourevitch’s book, *We Wish To Inform You* is a clear testament to the ways that God’s word can affect so many people in a negative way. As Gourevitch explains, most Rwandans believe in a parable commonly referred to as the Hamitic myth, which is derived from a Bible story that can be found in Genesis chapter 9. “Noah...got drunk and passed out naked in his tent. On emerging from his oblivion, Noah learned that his youngest son, Ham, had seen him naked; that Ham had told his brothers, Shem and Japheth...Noah responded by cursing the progeny of

Ham's son, Canaan saying 'A slave of slaves shall be to his brothers.'" (Gourevitch 51). The theory then developed that the inhabitants of Africa were decedents of Ham, and "...that the Africans who best resembled the tribes of Europe were inherently endowed with mastery..." (Gourevitch 53). This power, plus the hatred that already divided the Tutsis and the Hutus, was all the Hutus needed to carry out their "final solution' in 1994" (Gourevitch 94). Taking place mostly by machete, a majority of the murders were carried out individually and very gruesomely. The Hutu extremists would go on to murder over 800,000 Tutsi tribe members, all deaths justified in the name of God.

In Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's play *Nathan the Wise*, a much different type of religious persecution is taking place. Nathan, who has an adopted Christian daughter named Recha, is called upon many times in the play for being one of the few Jews in a mostly Christian community. When questioned about raising his Christian daughter in the Jewish faith, Nathan is forced to explain how she came into his care. This causes much commotion, especially with the knight Templar, who immediately goes to tell the Patriarch. "But what if the Jew's pity saved the child from dying in misery?" (Lessing 82). This causes quite a reaction with the Patriarch, who responds very angrily to the knight Templar. "Doesn't matter! The Jew will be burnt! For better to die in misery here than to be rescued only for eternal

ruin. Besides, who is the Jew to pre-empt God? God can save whom he wishes without him" (Lessing 82). This kind of prejudice was very common and it almost resulted in Nathan's death. Again we can clearly see someone using God's word as an excuse to justify murder.

Unfortunately, this type of religious bias still happens today, and on a much larger scale. Though they have been going on for quite some time, the recent attacks that took place on Sept. 11, 2001 brought them into the limelight. The most prominent group, Al Queda, has deemed its principle to be "the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders." This so-called Jihad, or holy war, is being waged to expel the regimes that the group calls non-Islamic and to get westerners out of Muslim countries. The scary part is that this extremist group has a worldwide reach with international cells in several countries. And just like the Rwandans and the slave holders, they believe that what they are doing is all in the name of a higher calling. Clearly, this has to be stopped. It has already killed thousands, who knows how many more will die in this name of God?

In Acts chapter three, the disciples Peter and John make their way into the temple. As they encounter a cripple who asks them for some money, Peter gives him the ability to walk instead of money. "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and

walk. ' And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong" (Acts iii: 6-7). As we see in Douglass, Gourevitch, and Lessing's examples, the world is full of religious persecution. While the slaveholders in Douglass' autobiography used the Bible as justification for slavery, the Hutus used ancient parables from Genesis to excuse their slaughtering of 800,000 Tutsis. In Lessing's play, we can see how naming God during the Crusades helped shape today's religious bias. But instead of casting each other down with God's word, why can't we all help each other stand up in God's name? As seen through Peter and John's story, good things can be done in God's name, it depends on how we use it.

Questions for discussion: Why does a name carry so much significance? Why is having the power to name important, then? Does Eric's paper seem to support or reject the idea that actions speak louder than words? Why or why not? What kind of name of God does Eric use, and to what purposes?