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Intro to World Religions

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Violent Proselytism in Christianity

In text and purpose, Christianity is without doubt one of the most peaceful and loving religions that the world has ever seen. Its messiah, Jesus Christ, as well as countless disciples of the faith have promoted these concepts of peace throughout their teachings. Popular phrases such as “turn the other cheek” have been promoted by the religion, and who could forget the golden rule laid out by Jesus: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets”. Throughout the scriptures, as well as throughout not only Jesus’ life but many of his disciples lives, this message of peace and love became the crux of the Christian religion. Despite this constant urge from the scriptures Christianity has turned to violence time and time again throughout history. This violence is not just Christians harming others, yet it is Christians harming others in the name of their faith. I believe this constant turning on the fundamentals of Christianity is due to the proselytism, or need to convert someone to ones own faith, that Christianity has promoted since its inception.

Proselytism is not a practice confined to Christianity. In fact, most world religions partake in proselytism. Islamic Jihadists have been at the forefront of this in recent years, often at the expense of many innocent lives. But for all the attention Islam gets for its violence in todays world, we must not turn a blind eye to the centuries of violence at the hands of Christians. One of the earliest, and most memorable forms of persecution by

Christians came during the reign of Constantine in Rome. Before Constantine came in to power in Rome, Christians had long been persecuted for their faith. This all changed when the emperor Constantine took over. After having seen a vision of a cross in the sky before his battle with the former emperor Maxentius, Constantine made Christianity the faith of the Roman Empire in 324 A.D. Constantine managed to take Christianity “from a persecuted minority cult into an established majority religion” (Odahl 1944). Despite years of being persecuted, Jesus famously preached to his disciples to “turn the other cheek”. The emperor and the Christians did not take the advice of Jesus, and began to persecute pagans and all non-Christians in the region. As T.D Barnes notes in his book “Constantine’s Prohibition of Pagan Sacrifice”, Constantine proceeded to forbid “the disgusting idolatry performed of old in cities and country-side”. This was a direct persecution of non-Christians, and the destruction of countless pagan temples ensued. Despite the forgiveness preached throughout the bible, pagans throughout the Roman Empire began to be persecuted, at times violently, for the sake of the expansion of Christianity. For our purpose, it seems the call to proselytize others to become Christian’s lead to these persecutions. This did not stop with Constantine, as his successors continued to persecute non-Christians violently, with pagan priests often being executed, as well as Constantius putting a death penalty on those practicing pagan rituals. The Roman Empire can be attributed with setting the table for what would turn into Christianity’s recurring theme of turning to violence in the name of faith. While trying to proselytize the rest of the Roman Empire to Christianity, Constantine and his successors managed to persecute and execute innocent people simply in the name of conversion.

Fast-forward a couple of centuries to the 12th century, when arguably the most overt acts of violence by Christianity (the Catholic Church in particular) began. The Crusades have become infamous for the death and persecution they brought to so many non-Christians during centuries of violence brought by the church in the hopes of broadening the stretch of Catholic Church. The Crusades were initially a conquest to take back the holy Land, but as years passes they turned into a military conquest of territory by the Catholic Church. Considering the Crusades lasted hundreds of years, summarizing every aspect of each crusade is outside the scope of this paper. Instead, I have pinpointed a couple events that exemplify the violence that occurred as a result of proselytism over the course of the Crusades. The First Crusade began in 1095, when the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos requested the aid of Pope Urban II in fighting the Turks. After Urban preached about a crusade later in the year, the first domino was knocked over, and it wasn't even in opposition to the Turks. In response to Urban's plea for a crusade, thousands of crusaders marched through present-day Germany to execute Jews. A particularly disturbing incident came when 10,000 crusaders, under the lead of Count Emicho, massacred 800 Jews who refused Christian baptism. As Robert Chazan writes, "Jews refused escape from death of baptism, submitting to the swords of Emicho's followers" (Chazan 293). This instance is particularly interesting in relation to the thesis of this paper. This was a direct instance where Emicho and his followers attempted to proselytize people to Christianity, and when they refused, responded by taking their lives. Despite this being the beginning of the Crusades, it exemplifies what the Crusades essentially were: the heavy-handed, violent proselytizing of hundreds of thousands of people.

Later, Christians from all over heard the call of the pope and travelled to help begin the crusade. They sacked the city of Antioch and continued the tone set by the Rhineland Massacre by killing the innocent and helpless. The Crusaders then continued to march to Jerusalem, where they were to meet opposition from Jewish and Muslim forces who had banded together to fight the Crusaders. Similarly to Antioch, Jerusalem- which is ironically considered the holy Land- was pillaged. This was the first of many attempts by Roman-Catholics to take back the Holy Land, as a number of Crusades ensued over the next few centuries. The second atrocity I will focus on during attempt of Christians to re-take the Holy Land comes in 1191. Yet again, Christians were attempting to take back the holy Land in an attempt to proselytize it to their Christian beliefs, yet this time the besiegement was brought on by the king of England- Richard the Lionheart- a devout Roman Catholic. After the Muslim leader Saladin took back Jerusalem, Richard the Lionheart lead a crusade to once again take back the Holy Land for the Christians. In order to recapture Jerusalem Richard and his crusaders first had to capture the port-city of Acre. The crusaders successfully captured the city, and captured 2,700 Muslim prisoners. Saladin and Richard struck a deal for the release of prisoners, but unfortunately for the prisoners Saladin did not come through on his part of the deal in time. In response, Richard massacred all “2,700 Muslim prisoners-plus their wives and children- ...”(Hamblin 2001). Although the massacre lead by Count Emicho was certainly more of an attempt to proselytize, I believe this massacre by King Richard was a case of proselytism as well. In an attempt to return the Holy Land’s people to Christianity, 2700 prisoners and their families were killed, a truly shocking act of violence. The examples provided by Count Emicho and King Richard the Lionheart are just two of countless

examples of the atrocities committed by Christians in the name of spreading Christianity during the Crusades.

Despite Islam getting the bulk of attention in today's media for their violent acts, it is clear that violence is still prevalent in a small portion of Christians today. In 1984, reverend Thomas Bray blew an abortion clinic to pieces due to the fact that women were committing sins against the beliefs of Christians. Ten years later, Bray served as the spokesperson for two friends, one of them being reverend Paul Hill, who murdered two staff members of an abortion clinic. He later wrote a book titled "*A Time to Kill*", which defended his own acts of terrorism, the murders committed by Hill, and the attempted murders committed by Shannon" (Juergensmeyer, 1998). In more recent memory, Robert Dear killed three people at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado in November of 2015, describing himself as a "warrior for babies". In Norway, Anders Breivik killed 77 in 2011 people due to his anti-Muslim beliefs, later stating that he was the "Savior of Christianity". Our news cycles are often flooded with Islamic Jihadists committing terrible atrocities for their faith, but violence by Christians is still very prevalent worldwide. I also find it startling that when Muslims do these acts of violence, the immediate response is that it was an act of terrorism. On the other hand, acts committed by Christians in the same manner are often written off as people simply defending their religion. The acts committed by reverend Thomas Bray and the others previously mentioned are no different than the acts committed by Muslim Jihadists. It is also important to point out that these are people committing these acts in the name of Christianity, not just Christians coincidentally committing crimes. The fact that all of the

aforementioned people admitted to acting in the name of Christianity exemplifies their attempt to proselytize the communities in which they live.

The final question left to be answered is why has such a peaceful religion constantly violently imposed its own beliefs on others? The Bible certainly calls for Christians to spread the word of God, but how this call has so often lead to violence by those who carry the word of God is certainly an enigma considering the peaceful manner in which Jesus and his initial disciples spread their message. I believe the answer to this matter can be found in the psychology of humans. It is not easy to change one's mind on a particular matter. Having said that, changing one's mind on religious beliefs is likely one of the most difficult of tasks. I believe Christians have so often turned to violence while attempting to proselytize others simply because conversion is a very difficult task. The 800 Jews slain by Emicho chose death over conversion is a clear indication of the lengths many will go to avoid being proselytized. From the Roman Empire, to the atrocities committed during the crusades, to the forced conversion of so many during the conquistador's pillaging of South and Central America, Christianity has long had a tradition of turning to violence in order to convert others. This violent form of proselytism is certainly a black eye for the world's largest religion, and something they continue to strive to improve even in today's world.

Works Cited

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