

## Two Words of Hope for Darfur

The response of the American religious community to the genocide in Darfur has revealed a fascinating difference between Jews and Christians, who, though they have united in an historical movement of hope, are divided on the interpretation of the relationship between faith and genocide. Some argue that we are all human beings and belong to one global family. But, while true, this argument is unfair to those involved in the struggle against genocide in Darfur if it fails to recognize that persons of faith are trying to develop a faithful response to genocide. The difference in perspectives between Jews and Christians becomes evident by asking the following two questions:

*Why, as a Jew, are you concerned about genocide?*

The answer is inevitably given in two familiar words: *the Holocaust*. Jews get it. Of course, it would be wrong to overlook the importance of the Exodus story for Jews and their long history of persecution, but we also must recognize that Jews look backward to the Holocaust and discover a present and future responsibility to ensure that never again will genocide be allowed to occur. The faithful response of Jews to genocide has made the world a better place.

*Why, as a Christian, are you concerned about genocide?*

Most Christians give a variety of answers to this question, ranging from an expression of their basic understanding of Christianity or their core beliefs to fragments of the teachings of Jesus and theological interpretation of well-known Biblical texts, such as the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. Most Christians, unlike Jews, have a difficult time articulating the relationship of their faith to genocide, especially in a two word answer. But, for Christians, there is a two word answer to this question: *Jesus Christ*.

Why am I concerned about genocide? I have a lot of personal experience with turning away from suffering. For years, as a father of a six-year-old boy, I found it impossible to look at photographs of starving children in Sudan. I quickly turned away from those images whenever I caught a glimpse of them on television or in newspapers and magazines. In the back of my mind, it was difficult to reconcile the image of my healthy and happy son with an image of a suffering child in Sudan. I was morally paralyzed by guilt and the fear of being overwhelmed by such catastrophic suffering. Then, one night, I ran across a discussion of the Sudanese crisis on public television. As always, I rushed to switch the channel. But, for some reason, that night I began an argument with myself and God over whether or not I should watch it. Finally, I decided. As I learned of the tragic plight of millions of innocent Sudanese, and looked at the images that for so long I had feared, I suddenly realized there wasn't any difference between my son and a Sudanese child. I heard the story of a young mother, who, carrying her infant, walked with her other children for several days through a desert to reach a refugee camp. Her husband had been murdered and her village destroyed by government-sponsored militias. I cried, and in an instant, the distance between us vanished. I looked at the parents in the refugee camps and realized they had the same love and hope for their children as I did for my son. From that day onward, I knew that I could no longer turn away. I had to do something. Later, as I continued to reflect on the scene, I came to see that young Sudanese mother and child as Mary and the infant Jesus fleeing the genocide perpetrated by Herod. My faith had come full circle.

This discovery -- that distance cannot eradicate the truth that we are one global family -- is summed up in another life-changing experience. Thomas Merton wrote: "In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers."

Our concern about genocide, as Christians, ultimately, springs from the reality of God's loves for us. Does this two word answer, Jesus Christ, represent easy triumphalism or cheap hope over the suffering, despair and death that we witness in places like Darfur?

Not if we recognize that the resurrection of Jesus Christ came only after his suffering, despair and death. This interpretation of genocide places Jesus Christ, or God's love, at the very midst of those victims of genocide in Darfur, whether they are Christian, Muslim or animist. In Matthew 25:40, speaking about the response of nations to the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and naked, the sick and prisoners, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." The hope that we, as Christians, may possess for the victims of genocide, the hope that animates our compassion and participation in the struggle to end genocide in Darfur, only exists because Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead and lives within us and the world as the spirit of hope, love and peace. This is our answer to the question of genocide: God's love for us revealed through Jesus Christ.

As an historical note, I should add that Jews did not easily reach an understanding that the Holocaust should be related to the struggle to prevent genocide. This interpretation, represented in the writings of Elie Wiesel and Yehuda Bauer and the work of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, remains a source of some contention within the Jewish community. But, through the leadership of the Jewish community in the movement to end the genocide in Darfur, this interpretation has proven its worthiness. Christians, who have not yet fully confronted the Holocaust or the role of German churches under Nazism, must undertake a difficult struggle to understand the relationship of their faith to genocide. Facing genocide inescapably points us, as Christians, backward toward the Holocaust and forward toward Darfur. This struggle by Christians already has begun through the participation of thousands of churches in an interfaith movement to end the genocide in Darfur.

Genocide is perhaps the most evil institution ever devised by human beings. Samantha Power, in *A Problem from Hell*, wrote that we are living in "an age of genocide." This is a far cry from the "beloved community" articulated in word and deed by Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King could not envision the beloved community apart from global peace and economic justice. He made a vital connection between the outcast blessed by God and the blessed community. The beloved community is the restored community, and that is our

calling, here and in Darfur. Of course, to paraphrase Dr. King, we may not get there as individuals, but as a people, as the beloved community, we will get there. He wrote: “Although man’s moral pilgrimage may never reach a destination point on earth, his never-ceasing strivings may bring him ever closer to the city of righteousness. And though the Kingdom of God may remain not yet as a universal reality in history, in the present it may exist in such isolated forms as in judgment, in personal devotion, and in some group life. . . . Above all, we must be reminded anew that God is at work in his universe. He is not outside the world looking on within a sort of cold indifference. . . . As we struggle to defeat the forces of evil, the God of the universe struggles with us. Evil dies on the seashore, not merely because of man’s endless struggle against it, but because of God’s power to defeat it.”

Genocide, whether we like it or not, has become a central concern for people of faith. Why? It is a fundamental attack on the Biblical teaching that every person is created in the image of God. It is a fundamental attack on the beloved community, and the right to live peacefully in a diverse society of equals. It is a fundamental attack on the right to worship, as evidenced by the physical destruction of synagogues, churches and mosques from the Armenian genocide in 1915, in which one and a half million persons were killed, to Darfur nearly one hundred years later. Most importantly, it is a fundamental attack on the love of God for every human being. Less evident, though, is the destruction of faith itself through cooptation or perversion.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor executed by the Nazis in 1945 following a failed plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler, watched in anguish as the German Christian church enthusiastically joined in his country’s worship of Hitler. German Christians paraded to church on Sundays waving flags that depicted a swastika at the center of the cross. In response to this perversion of Christianity, Rev. Bonhoeffer and other Christian dissenters founded the Confessing Church in 1934. The central tenant of the Confessing Church held that Jesus Christ is the eternal head of the church, not Hitler, as the German Christian church and people had proclaimed. The “Barmen Declaration” of the

Confessing Church included this repudiation of temporal authority that assigns to itself a divine role in the world:

*We reject the false doctrine that the Church could have permission to hand over the form of its message and of its order to whatever it itself might wish or to the vicissitudes of the prevailing ideological and political convictions of the day.*

The Barmen Declaration posed a question for future generations of Christians: Will the church ever again participate in a political system that practices genocide? Unfortunately, this question was answered only sixty years later in Rwanda when one million innocent people were murdered in three months as the world idly watched. Tragically, many Rwandan churches were active participants in the genocide. Ten years later, church leaders from throughout the world gathered in the capital of Rwanda to sign the Kigali Covenant. The document included an admission, if not of complicity, of guilt.

*We accept our guilt for inaction during the genocide in Rwanda before God, and offer our apology, as some Rwandan churches did, to the people of Rwanda.*

Genocide, as a human institution, can be prevented, and even, ended. But first, Christians must learn to respond with a two word answer to the question: *Why, as a Christian, are you concerned about genocide?*

Jesus Christ is our answer to those who say we should ignore, trivialize or participate in genocide. Since genocide strikes at the heart of what Dr. King called the beloved community, “an attack on faith anywhere,” to paraphrase his famous dictum on justice, “is an attack on faith everywhere.” Complicity, inaction, and even, sincere confessions of guilt, should not again be allowed to pervert our faith or excuse the haunting failure of our religious institutions throughout the last century. Yehuda Bauer, a prominent scholar of the Holocaust, writes:

*We are all one human race, interconnected and interdependent. Politics that are not based on moral considerations are, at the end of the day, not practical politics at all. [...]*

*I come from a people that gave the ten commandments to the world. Let us agree that we need three more, and they are these: thou shalt not be a perpetrator; thou shalt not be a victim; and thou shalt never, but never, be a bystander.*

How does one move from the indifference and detachment of a bystander to the compassion and involvement of a participant? As Christians, we understand this movement as conversion, a radical turning toward God that involves our whole being. Jesus said, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:35). The decision to become a bystander doesn’t represent the lack of action but an active capitulation to despair that reveals an absence of hope in the face of evil. Instead of turning toward God, who is present through divine love with the victims of genocide, we turn away from evil and, ironically, lose ourselves in despair. Against this despair, stands the empty cross.

The creative tension between the Jesus of the cross and the Jesus of the resurrection leads us beyond the darkness of alienation into the light of community. The Jesus of the cross reaches across the chasm separating us from the victims of genocide to open our eyes and hearts to the Jesus of the resurrection. God’s presence in the world is illuminated through our compassion and hope for the victims of genocide. This compassion and hope, perhaps, rooted in personal pain and suffering, is a fountain for our own humanness, ever renewed through faith in a God of compassion and hope.

The movement from a bystander to a participant isn’t measured by the quantity of our actions on behalf of the victims of genocide, such as the size of a check or the number of letters we write to Congress, but by the quality of the expression of our faith. Is Christ present in the world through our faith and action? A bystander, tragically, can never satisfactorily answer this question because he or she has taken refuge in silence. A participant, however, lives the question as if their own salvation depended on the answer. Perhaps it does. In a poem called *The Silence of the Bystander*, Elie Wiesel writes, “To look away from evil: Is this not the sin of all ‘good’ people?”

As participants in the struggle to end genocide, we reject the worldly role of bystander in order to accept the divine reality of God's love for humanity. How can we choose to be a bystander not only to genocide but also to the special love of God for the victims of genocide? As participants, we understand that genocide, rather than merely being another issue in an endless stream of important issues, is a decisive historical moment that defines our relationship and the relationship of humanity with God. Genocide is a war against God. Genocide is a war against our own humanness. The Kigali Covenant includes this statement: "The perpetrators of the [Rwandan] genocide killed their humanness, cut off their relationship to God, before they could take away the humanness of others." God is not a bystander in this war. Neither can we afford to be bystanders. God's call to participation in the struggle against genocide as an act of survival for our faith and humanity rests with our response. Will you be a bystander or a participant? This question defines the age of genocide, and our faith, as we confront an age of genocide.

The Christian church, at least in Germany and Rwanda, has learned through bitter experience that when an entire people is faced with eradication, the whole of society and the whole church are consequently faced with a pivotal moral decision. Will the Christian church allow its fundamental values and institutions to be perverted through complicity, trivialization or inaction, or instead, will it act against genocide, and thereby, fulfill the moral imperative represented in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? How will you, as an individual Christian, answer this question? For believers, Jesus Christ, maybe always, but especially in an age of genocide, is as much a question as an answer.

It is a question that will not go away. This question will shape the institution and message of the Christian church for generations to come and determine its survival or, at best, disappearance into irrelevance, and, at worst, descent into barbaric destructiveness. Stay with this question. Let it rest in your heart. Pray it.

*Why, as a Christian, are you concerned about genocide?*

Sudanese Bishop Macram Max Gassis, after learning that a bombing raid by the Sudanese military destroyed a Catholic school, killing the students and teachers, wrote these words:

*God will not abandon us. God will raise us from the dead. Pray that people of good will throughout the world will awake to our tragedy and offer themselves as God's instruments to help us.*

Let us answer his hope, and the hope of the Sudanese people, with our hope in Jesus Christ our Savior.

*Amen.*