

HTE653 – Peace and Justice: Latin American Perspectives
Final Reflection Essay
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The God that Failed

This essay takes its name from a song performed by the heavy metal band Metallica. The purported back story is that James Hetfield—Metallica’s lead singer—wrote the song after his mother died of cancer because as a believer in Christian Science she refused to seek medical attention. From Hetfield’s perspective, her God failed. He sings, “I see faith in your eyes....I hear faith in your cries. Broken is the promise, betrayal.” Similarly, missionaries have been spreading “brands” of Christianity for centuries in Guatemala and Central America, and yet it can be argued that the culture of violence in the region demonstrates that Christianity has done little more for these societies than Christian Science did for Hetfield’s mother. In this essay, I will compare statistics from four countries as a means of supporting this diagnosis of a failed God,¹ and I will also consider possible explanations for the reality.

Statistical Comparison

I have chosen to compare these four particular countries—The United States, South Korea, Kenya and Guatemala—because I have either worked or studied in each of them. Although these countries do not form a representative sample for drawing conclusions about the effects of Christianity in all places, this sampling was intriguing for me because I observed patterns during my time in these places, and I was curious if data would support or argue against my observations. The complete data comparison can be found in Appendix A.

¹ I realize this is a provocative choice of words. However, because each missionary group purported to be preaching the *truth* about the God of heaven, I believe it is a useful phrase. Did the God they preach have the power to improve society?

My hypothesis is that if Christianity improves societies, then countries with higher percentages of Christians should demonstrate better scores on a range of social science markers. By comparing these scores, we can see whether or not Christianity correlates with healthier societies. Table 1 lists the percentage of Christians in each of these four countries from greatest to least.

Table 1: Christian Percent by Country

Country	Christian Percentage of Population²
Guatemala	97.5
Kenya	85.1
United States	78.4
South Korea	29.2

According to my hypothesis, Guatemala and Kenya should rank higher than the other two countries on a range of wellness measures, and Korea should rank the lowest. However, data does not support this view. While there are innumerable ways to compare these countries, I will limit this discussion to three—murder rates, income distribution, and corruption. I have chosen these three factors for two reasons. First, they each are discussed at length in the Bible. For example, murder is prohibited in the Ten Commandments. Also, the ancient sabbatical and Jubilee laws were aimed at equalizing wealth accumulation, and the Bible clearly teaches against greed. Finally, truthfulness and honesty are biblical values from beginning to end.

The second reason for choosing these three points of comparison is that they are less directly influenced by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) than many other markers. That is, other categories listed in Appendix A, such as longevity, infant mortality, and literacy, are presumably highly affected by the relative affluence of the country of consideration. To control for income, I have attempted to select three variables that are at least less directly affected by overall GDP.

² Retrieved January 28, 2011, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_by_country.

My first comparison is that of homicide rates. Because the Bible repeatedly teaches to love, forgive and be peaceful (e.g., Matt. 5:9, 43-44; 18:21-22; 22:36-40), it would seemingly follow that societies with more Christians should have lower rates of murder. In fact, the opposite is true for these four countries (see Table 2). The country with the fewest Christians has the lowest homicide rate (South Korea, 2.3 murders per 100,000 residents), while the country with the most Christians has the highest rate of murder (Guatemala, 52 murders per 100,000).

Table 2: Homicide Comparison

Country	% Christian	Homicide (per 100,000 residents) ³
Guatemala	97.5	52
Kenya	85.1	3.6
United States	78.4	5
South Korea	29.2	2.3

The connection between religion and violence can also be studied within countries rather than across them. In the United States, the Pew Research Center found a positive correlation between frequency of church attendance and increased support for torture.⁴ This further bolsters the connection between Christianity and violence.

The second data point is the comparison of wealth distribution between countries, or the spread of wealth between the rich and poor. Since Christianity emphasizes using resources to care for others (e.g., Luke 16:19-31; Acts 2:44-45; 1 John 3:17), and Jesus proclaimed the Jubilee of the Old Testament at his inaugural speech (Luke 4:16-19; Lev. 25; Mic. 4:3-5), one might expect to see more income equality in countries with higher percentages of Christians. Again, the opposite is true. South Korea has the fewest Christians and the most equal distribution of wealth, while Guatemala is the most Christian and has the greatest wealth gap as measured by

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_intentional_homicide_rate

⁴ "The Religious Dimensions of the Torture Debate," *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life: Publications*, April 29, 2009, <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=156>.

the Gini coefficient (see Table 3).⁵ And unfortunately, the disparity is increasing in the United States, where “in 1987 the top 1% of taxpayers received 12.3% of all pre-tax income. Twenty years later their share, at 23.5%, was nearly twice as large. The bottom half’s share fell from 15.6% to 12.2% over the same period.”⁶

Table 3: Wealth Distribution

Country	% Christian	Gini Coefficient⁷
Guatemala	97.5	55.1
Kenya	85.1	42.5
United States	78.4	40.8
South Korea	29.2	31.6

The third country comparison regards corruption. One might predict a positive correlation between increased numbers of Christians and reduced amounts of corruption; however, once again this is not true for the given sample. Table 4 provides the numbers and Figure 1 demonstrates that the two countries with the highest percentage of Christians (Guatemala and Kenya) are perceived as having more corruption than the two with fewer Christians (United States and South Korea). For this score, Guatemala was not perceived as the most corrupt—Kenya received that rank—but they were both viewed as much more corrupt than the other two in the comparison.

Table 4: Corruption

Country	% Christian	Corruption⁸ (low scores are more corrupt)
Guatemala	97.5	3.2
Kenya	85.1	2.1
United States	78.4	7.1
South Korea	29.2	5.4

⁵ Admittedly, this brief analysis does not take into account the effects of U.S. efforts to squelch land reform efforts between 1944 and 1954. Had Guatemala been free to enact these changes, today’s numbers arguably could be very different.

⁶ “The Rise and Rise of the Cognitive Elite: Brains Bring Ever Larger Rewards,” *The Economist*, January 22, 2011, 7.

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_income_equality

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corruption_by_country

In summary, we have seen that murder, the gap between rich and poor, and corruption are positively instead of negatively correlated with Christianity (as operationalized by percentage of a population), at least for the small sample used in this comparison. These numbers quantify the feelings and experiences I have had in these countries, for example, feeling safe at virtually any time in South Korea, and quite often feeling on-guard in Guatemala and Kenya.

Further comparisons would reveal more indictments against the “Christian West.” For example, as stated above, South Korea has the smallest number of Christians and yet despite this and its smaller GDP per capita than the U.S., it still has lower infant mortality, lower under-5 mortality, lower unemployment, and higher life expectancy than the U.S. population (see Appendix A). Clearly, Christianity (at least as it has been conceived and promulgated) is not the panacea for the world’s problems.

Reflection

Based on his life experience, Ted Haggard, a once powerful preacher who had a public fall, confides, “I used to think the church was the light of the world. But I’ve completely lost my faith in it.”⁹ The numbers stated above and presented in Appendix A lead me to a similar sentiment. The Bible is against gross income disparity¹⁰, violence and corruption, yet the God of the western world has been unable to reduce these vices in society. Believing that Jesus really did teach the way of peace (Luke 1:76-79) and that failing to learn the things that make for peace really does disrupt society (Luke 19:41-44), I am forced to ask what has gone wrong. What has failed? Is it the God of heaven? Is it the western conception of God? Have missionaries portrayed the wrong God?

⁹ Retrieved on January 28, 2011, from <http://www.gq.com/news-politics/newsmakers/201102/pastor-ted-haggard?printable=true>.

¹⁰ When the prophets Amos, Micah and Isaiah began calling for justice, archaeologists say the gap between rich and poor in Israel and Judah had become enormous. See *Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible* (Malchow, 1996, p. 12).

While I lack the statistical, historical and sociological data needed to address these questions with the precision that they deserve, I will offer a few thoughts regarding these questions of failure. I believe that Alan Kreider's book, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* holds at least some of the answers.¹¹ In this short book, Kreider traces the move away from the early church's focus on costly and committed discipleship as a means of joining the Christian family to less demanding qualifications under Constantine and continuing on well after him. This limited focus on living the ethics of Jesus persisted in Catholicism through the use of indulgences and in Protestantism through its Reformation-era preoccupation with salvation by grace alone. This Protestant view is captured well by the church sign on the right; church dispenses forgiveness so people have a free ticket to eternity rather than learning how to live well for God here and now.¹²



Elements within each branch of Christianity continued to live and teach the way of Jesus as well as truths about him, but these were, in my view, small segments that were not significant forces for good in society. For example, within Protestantism both Anabaptists and Seventh-day Adventists have historically attempted to take seriously living the way of Jesus, though they are also certainly not unsullied beacons of light and hope. Despite my appreciation for these movements, my hope for the world is in Jesus, not organized religion or any other institution. With Derek Webb I sing, “My first allegiance is not to a flag, a country, or a man. My first allegiance is not to democracy or blood. It’s to a King and a Kingdom.”¹³

¹¹ Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999).

¹² <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-447344>

¹³ “A King and a Kingdom” on the album *Mockingbird* (2005).

Appendix A – Comparative Data Table

		U.S.	S Korea	Guatemala	Kenya
Christian Population (%) ¹⁴		78.4	29.2	97.5	85.1
Per capita GDP (PPP, \$) ¹⁵	IMF	47,123	29,791	4,871	1,784
	CIA	47,400	30,200	5,200	1,600
Income Distribution/Equality ¹⁶	UN R/P 10%	15.9	7.8	48.2	13.6
	UN R/P 20%	8.4	4.7	20.3	8.2
	UN GINI	40.8	31.6	55.1	42.5
Unemployment ¹⁷ (need stats for underemployment)		9.4	3.7	3.2 (2005)	40
Infant Mortality ¹⁸	UN	6.3	4.1	30.1	64.4
	CIA	6.26	4.26	27.84	54.7
5yr Mortality ¹⁹	UN	7.8	4.8	39.3	104.1
Life Expectancy ²⁰	UN	78.11	78.6	70.3	54.1
Homicide Rate ²¹ (per year per 100,000 inhabitants)		5	2.3	52	3.6
Healthcare (rank) ²²	WHO	37	58	78	140
Corruption ²³	TI	7.1	5.4	3.2	2.1
Literacy (% of pop.) ²⁴	UN	99	99	73.2	73.6
Undernourishment (% of pop.) ²⁵	UN	--	--	16	30
Global Hunger Index (GHI) ²⁶	IFPRI	--	--	12	19.8
Multidimensional Poverty Index ²⁷	UN	--	--	0.127	0.302
Human Development Index (rank) ²⁸	UN	4	12	116	128
Suicide ²⁹ (per 100,000 people per year)		11.1	31	2.3	--
Colonization (vastly over-simplified)		Europe 1565-1776	Japan 1910-1945	Spain 1524-1821	Europe 1505-1962

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_by_country

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_%28PPP%29_per_capita

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_income_equality

¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_unemployment_rate

¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_infant_mortality_rate

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_infant_mortality_rate

²⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_life_expectancy

²¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_intentional_homicide_rate

²² <http://www.photius.com/rankings/healthranks.html>

²³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corruption_by_country

²⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_literacy_rate

²⁵

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_percentage_of_population_suffering_from_undernourishment

²⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/datablog/2010/oct/11/global-hunger-index>

²⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multidimensional_Poverty_Index

²⁸ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>

²⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_suicide_rate