

The poisonwood preacher



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Throughout *The Poisonwood Bible*, author Barbara Kingsolver uses Nathan Price as a representation of the dangers of the combination of religious fervor and power in the wrong hands. This is not meaning to state that religion on its own is bad influence, but that it has the potential to be if it is implemented in the wrong way – forced by judgment or focused only on specific written rules rather than the ideology and true meaning behind it. Nathan is an impeccable example of the ‘dangerous hands’ religious control should not be placed into. He uses the bible like a weapon, bludgeoning the people of Kilanga with his strict beliefs of Christianity rather than approaching them with flexible methods and an ease of adaptation to their highly differing culture. One of the major flaws in Nathan Price’s religious practice is his failure to recognize the true meaning of Christianity. Instead, he focuses only on the specific standards and rules set by the bible word for word, such as baptism or prayer, when he should be embracing the spirit of the religion, such as compassion, love, and kindness.

A prime illustration of this obliviousness is Nathan’s interaction with his family. Nathan consistently prioritizes his religious mission over his family, neglecting to show his wife and daughters the love and care they deserve. Orleanna Price, Nathan’s wife, often informs the reader of his neglect through her storytelling of his treatment of her throughout their marriage. Leading up to her marriage with Nathan Price at a young age of 17, Orleanna had been a bright, passionate, and ambitious young girl living in Mississippi. Once she enters marriage, she loses nearly all sense of will and becomes an obedient and passive housewife. Orleanna is undermined by her husband’s higher priority of religion to the point at which his actions towards her are

not simply of neglect, but disgust; “ He was profoundly embarrassed by my pregnancies. To his way of thinking they were unearned blessings, and furthermore each one drew God’s attention anew to my having a vagina and his having a penis and the fact we’d laid them near enough together to conceive a child” (Page 198, Orleanna). Nathan doesn’t view reproduction with his wife as a beautiful and blessed event, but rather a shameful action in God’s eyes. Nathan’s neglect doesn’t stop at his wife; it carries onward to a lack of care for his entire family.

When the Congo turned to a politically unstable state in the midst of the war, the Mission State wanted to pull the Price family out of the country and back to safety within American borders. However, Nathan chose to disregard the Mission State’s advice and fought against his family’s desire to listen to it; “ Mother tries to explain to him day in and day out about how he is putting his own children in jeopardy of their lives, but he won’t even listen to his own wife, much less his mere eldest daughter” (Page 176, Rachel). He risks losing his entire family without hesitation simply to continue his goal of diffusing Christianity throughout the Congo. Now, some may see this as a selfless and humble decision to make, but Nathan did not make this decision because he believed the Congolese people needed faith; he did this to satisfy his own need to be successful in his spread of the Christian faith. Furthermore, Nathan continues to demonstrate his priority ranking of religion as higher than his own family after the death of his daughter Ruth May Price. In immediate reaction to the death of Ruth May, Nathan Price exclaims, “ She wasn’t even baptized yet” (Page 368, Nathan), in a state of shock. The event of losing a child usually causes a traumatic emotional response; however,

Nathan only expressed his concern of failing to fulfill his personal religious mission.

Despite the rest of the family having passionate and devastating reactions to Ruth May's death – “ As long as I kept moving, my grief streamed out behind me like a swimmer's long hair in water. I knew the weight was there but it didn't touch me. Only when I stopped did the slick, dark stuff of it come floating around my face, catching my arms and throat till I began to drown” (Page 281, Orleanna) – and mourning her deeply, Nathan persisted to utilize her death to fulfill his ultimate goal of baptizing the Congolese. His absence of a natural, human response to his daughter's death goes to show his selfishness and unnecessarily low priority for his family. Additionally, Nathan's comment after Ruth May's death, “ She wasn't even baptized yet” (Page 368, Nathan), is a sign of his hypocrisy as a ‘ devout Christian.’ Nathan steadily preaches the importance of baptism to all of the Congolese peoples, yet he never baptized his own daughter. This leads to the discussion of religious hypocrisy that heavily lives on in today's society, whether it is a massive scandal or the discreet yet tangible group of faulted Christians. In example, the Holy See of the Catholic Church released news in 2010 that nearly 3, 000 priests had allegations of sex abuse over the last fifty years. The bible clearly states, “ Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,” (1 Corinthians 6: 9). As a secondary example, another main issue with religious institutions' infliction of belief on the members of society is Planned Parenthood and the use of any form of contraception.

Due to clerical celibacy, a priest is not allowed to marry or have children. Therefore, he does not experience the struggles and hardships of supporting a family. The fact that priests preach to churchgoers that they must not divorce or use any form of contraception is simply hypocritical. They are unable to understand the dynamics of living with a wife and kids and the circumstances that create a difficulty in following the strict standards of strict preaching of Christianity, such as being unable to financially support another child leading to the use of birth control, or having such a cruel relationship with your spouse that both of you - and your children if any - are better off separated. It is easy for a single man with no children to preach the abstention from forms of birth control, sex, and divorce, as he never comes to face those issues. Though this story took place in a different time period, Kingsolver outlines these faults in Christian institutions through the actions and characteristics of her characters. In continuation of Nathan's inadequate methods of preaching, his goals of diffusing Christianity are too focused on the salvation, such as heaven and hell, that he is oblivious to the true issues of reality sitting right in front of him and makes no effort to attend to them like a true missionary would.

As an example, Mama Tataba tells him the people of the Congo do not wish to be baptized in the river; " She [a girl in the village] got killed and eaten by a crocodile. They don't let their children step foot in the river, ever. Not even to be washed in the Blood of the Lamb" (Page 81, Leah). Even after being told that a child's life was recently taken there and that the people of Kilanga will ultimately refuse to enter the waters for baptism, he does not change his approach but simply persists to preach the importance and necessity of

baptism and that the river is the only proper place to do so. Overall, Nathan Price is a stern, rigid, and inflexible preacher who has no desire to adapt to the Congolese culture. He remains unable to acclimate to his new environment, therefore hindering his religious influence over the people of Kilanga. Throughout the story, he makes no attempt to amend his methods for the best of the Congolese peoples; “ he confronts and attempts to change a people he does not understand” (Purcell). He is unable to adapt to new environment and culture and does not spread Christianity in the correct way to implement the greatest effect on the Congolese religiously, failing to refrain from influencing all of their ideology, culture, and general way of life. His daughters’ maintain a great understanding of their father’s difficult nature, as Leah explains, “ Everything you’re sure is right can be wrong in another place. Especially here” (Page 505, Leah). Though this quote is in reference to the specific language differences from English to Congolese, it has a deeper and broadly applicable meaning to her father and his inflexible practices.

Moreover, Nathan is convinced that his ideas are superior, even when he is proved wrong with concrete evidence and valid facts. His very first action in Kilanga, attempting to farm the land, is a perfect example of his righteousness. Though it is shown that his method purely does not work. Nathan refuses to listen to Mama Tataba’s advice about cropping and planting the seeds properly. He hastily continues to plant in the garden, “ He bent over and began to rip out long handfuls of grass with quick, energetic jerks as though tearing out the hair of the world” (Page 36, Leah), showing his disturbance by being proved wrong and his stubbornness by refusing to

admit he was wrong. He ends up killing all of the crops and wasting time and resources, harming all the other people of Kilanga but feeding his own ego as he, in his mind, was right again. This is a static characteristic of Nathan that was foreshadowed throughout the book by his family, “ It’s harder to imagine a mortal man more unwilling to change his course than Nathan Price” (Page 96, Orleanna). Likewise, Nathan refuses to listen or consider all others’ opinions and seeks only the mission sent to him by God. This ties into the fact that he uses God and religion to exert his arrogance and need for control to show that he is correct and all others’ opinions are inferior.

As previously and repeatedly stated, Nathan is a very arrogant, judgmental, and naïve man. He uses his religious mission to satiate himself by making him feel higher and feeding his arrogance through his ability to be condescending to those who are “ unsaved”. He is too focused on his own salvation that he does not truly care about the saving of others souls or their well-being, only the prosperity it will bring him if he is successful in his mission. He leads himself to believe that the way to secure his spot to salvation is by converting as many souls to Christianity as possible, though that isn’t necessarily the direct meaning behind Christianity. As his daughter explains, “ Father needs permission only from the Savior” (page 36, Leah), whose words Nathan tends to take too almost too seriously.

Contrarily, Kingsolver uses Brother Fowles as a representation of the ‘ good’ of religion and the right hands it should be placed in in order to prosper. Fowles is the foil to Nathan Price’s close-minded and selfish preaching style as he is open to understanding the Congolese culture and works to incorporate it into his teaching of Christianity; “ He doesn’t proselytize, but rather engages in

dialogue with the indigenous people [of the Congo]” (Purcell). He acknowledges that many of the ‘ parables’ in the bible do not make sense to the Congolese people as they are unable to relate to and understand it contextually, and some of them only work if “ you change a few words” (page 246). Fowles is an open interpreter of the Bible and doesn’t follow it word for word, but applies the true meaning behind it in a broader and more understandable way to the Congolese people. He doesn’t only care to change the Congolese people’s way of life in order to reach salvation, but instead focuses on teaching how the Christian ideology can be applied to their “ daily experiences of life” (Purcell). Kingsolver creates a heavy contrast between Nathan Price and Brother Fowles that shines light on the ‘ bad’ and the ‘ good’ of religion and the hazard of abusing it’s strength. She characterizes the two reverends through the girls’ – Orleanna, Rachel, Leah, Ruth-May, Adah – perspectives and perceptions of both men and men’s actions throughout the novel.

Kingsolver thus portrays each character in different ways through the girls’ voices; they speak of their father, Nathan, in a harsh and almost annoyed tone, while they speak of Brother Fowles in a relaxed and respectable tone. This plays a major role in the reader’s view of each reverend, as he or she only knows of them according to girls’ portrayal of them. Throughout the novel, Kingsolver successfully depicts the two sides of the Christian faith, the effective way of preaching to those who wish to not hear it, and the dire importance of whose hands religious fervor is placed in.

Works Cited

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