

God and war: king henry's religious concern in henry v



**ASSIGN
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In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, King Henry constantly considers the position of God in his endeavors of war. The King's pondering of God's view of and hand in war continuously guides his decisions and methods. Henry's consideration of God eventually leads England to success even though the hand of God might not have had the same effect that the King and the soldiers believe it does. Many argue that King Henry acts impulsively and immorally when deciding to go to war. However, one can clearly see that Henry searches for God's wisdom when making decisions regarding his men and country. Moreover, King Henry's faith uplifts his men, proving that his faith aids in the victory.

While God may not have directly decided that the English would win the war, King Henry's faith in God and the religious ties he makes to war allow him to influence the hearts of his men, leading him to win the war. Part of King Henry's success in *Henry V* derives from his moral consciousness and his tendency to view the lives of his people as high in importance, in accordance with his virtues. When making the decision of whether to enter into war, King Henry is most concerned with the morality of the war. He warns Canterbury, "Take heed how you impawn our person, how you awake our sleeping sword of war. We charge you in the name of God, take heed, for never two such kingdoms did contend without much fall of blood" (I. ii. 23-27). Henry is hesitant to spill innocent blood until he is sure that the cause of war is just. His concern displays that he is self-aware of the morality of his actions as a king. This honorable personality trait eventually helps his soldiers to trust and respect him more—his virtues lead his soldiers to want to fight for him. He asks Canterbury, "May I with right and conscious make this claim," (119)

displaying that he will not allow his people to die if it is not for a righteous cause. Henry's view of the justice of war highly contrasts the mocking gift of the Dauphin of France. The gift of tennis balls from the Dauphin displays the Dauphin's impulsiveness and willingness to sacrifice innocent lives without a sincere thought. King Henry responds to this petty gift with a heavy speech about the bloodshed and horror of war, conveying that his view of war is much more mature. His seriousness inspires his lords, and eventually his soldiers.

Near the end of the play, Henry's soldiers will see his faith in God and his morality, which raises their morale and helps them to win the war. Before Battle, Henry conveys that he is a good king by disguising himself and going out into the tents to assess the morale of his soldiers. In finding that his men are criticizing him for being the cause for their deaths, he again responds by connecting war to morality God's plan. Henry says, " War is His beadle, war is His vengeance," (IV. i. 164-165) explaining that a king is not responsible for the sins of his people, and encouraging his soldiers to repent their sins and fight with their minds open to a higher purpose. He also tells his men that if God grants them the gift of survival, they should be thankful. As he declares " and in him that escapes, it were not sin to think that, making God so free an offer, He let him outlive that day to see His greatness and to teach others how they should prepare" (177-181). King Henry's view of God's hand in war inspires his soldiers to be aware of a higher purpose while in battle. His soldiers respond positively, one saying, " I'm determine to fight lustily for him" (84-85). Henry's faith in God boots his soldiers' morale and eventually leads them to defeat the French.

A similar effect occurs when King Henry gives the Saint Crispin's Day speech in Act 4 scene 3. He begins every declaration with ' By God,' instilling religious excitement in his soldiers. He declares that any man who does not want to fight with the rest of the men in the name of God should go home. This speech inspires the English forces into exuberance, and helps them to win the battle. King Henry's referring to God in his speeches before battle have a direct result over his soldiers' morale, and his religious faith and morality teaches his men to trust and respect him, and want to fight under his command.