

Unto Others

An exploration of Christianity as an accomplice and adversary to the aims of empire in

Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*.

by

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A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter:  
He that has found one has found a treasure.  
There is nothing so precious as a faithful friend.  
(Sirach 6:14)

To my best friend,  
Madelyn Ladner Green.

Thank you for everything, I love you.

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## Abstract

Shedding light on one of the darkest moments in both Congolese and American history, Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, explores the relationship between religion and imperialism, missionaries and conquerors. Set on the eve of the Congo's independence from Belgium, Kingsolver's novel centers on a 1950's Georgian family bringing God's light to the small Congolese village of Kilanga. Following the militant and fanatical minister, Nathan Price, each of the five Price women gradually experiences the consequences of Nathan's unflinching fundamentalism, realizing him to be ineffective as both a provider and a spiritual leader. The missionary movement throughout the novel becomes a mechanism for exploring the themes of colonization and liberation. Representing multiple religious voices, Kingsolver conveys the presence of harmful, ethnocentric agendas like Nathan's, but also depicts missionaries that enact their Christianity through charity. Ultimately concerned with Christianity's progression and evolution, Kingsolver presents religion as an institution capable of fostering global change and betterment.

In the first chapter I will explore Nathan as a figure embodying the marriage of colonial initiatives and religion. Through a series of close, textual readings, and through an examination of scholarship on *The Poisonwood Bible*, I establish that Nathan uses Christianity to promote ideas of capitalism, racism, and ethnocentrism. A remnant of nineteenth collusion between empire and Christianity, Nathan attempts to utilize archaic techniques for gaining converts. He lacks both the spiritual and military fortitude to force his beliefs on the Congolese people. Nathan's inability to perceive value in non-Western cultures, and failure to present Christianity as relevant in the context of village life, result in the village largely ignoring his messages. Both contemptible as a character and tragically comical as a minister, Nathan presents a particular kind of Christianity that, according to Kingsolver, no longer holds an effective or appropriate place in Congolese society.

In the second chapter, I will discuss Kingsolver's positive presentation of other Christian voices throughout the novel. A man unlike Nathan in almost every way, Fowles embraces village life, and integrates himself in Congolese culture. His approach to Christianity and missionary work inspires Leah Price to accept a similar religious transformation, rejecting Nathan's hateful attitudes. Leah carries Fowles' advice into her adult life as an African wife, mother and social activist. Using intense close reading of *The Poisonwood Bible*, in addition to Biblical analysis, I examine Kingsolver's proposal of Christianity as a mechanism of social justice and world change.

The third chapter will investigate the way Kingsolver uses the novel's structure and epigraphs to reinforce Christianity as a movement capable of stimulating and sustaining an international community. First examining Kingsolver's thematic elements and political intentions through the lens of Biblical and postcolonial scholars, I suggest Kingsolver's novel as a didactic work concerned with changing Christian practice and perception. Next, through textual and thematic readings of Kingsolver's specifically selected epigraphs, I reveal the political and social parallels between Biblical narratives and the Congo's colonial history. Demonstrating the way scripture can be appropriated as a tool of empowerment Kingsolver like Fowles and Leah makes Christianity accessible and relevant, showing the potential for every passage to be read with an eye for acceptance rather than condemnation.

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## Introduction

Good and Great Friend,

I have the honour to submit for your Majesty's consideration some reflections respecting the Independent State of the Congo based upon careful study and inspection of the country... Your Majesty's Government has sequestered their [Congolese] land, burned their towns, stolen their property, enslaved their women and children, and committed other crimes too numerous to mention in detail. It is natural that they everywhere shrink from "*the fostering care*" your Majesty's government so eagerly proffers them. There has been, to my absolute knowledge, no "*honest and practical effort made to increase their knowledge and secure their welfare.*" Your Majesty's Government has never spent one franc for educational purposes, not instituted any practical system of industrialism. Indeed the most unpractical measures have been adopted *against* the natives in nearly every respect...

Only a few of the powerful opening lines to George Washington Williams, "*An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo by Colonel the Honorable Geo W. Williams of the United States of America,*" this document represents one of the first attempts to protest and publicize the horrendous conditions in the nineteenth century Congo. A minister, historian and aspiring writer, Williams first encountered Leopold during a newspaper interview. Initially captivated by Leopold's charm and respectability, Williams struck an agreement with Leopold and entered the Belgian Congo intending to do research for the promotion of a Black labor force in Africa. After a year of traveling through the territory, however, Williams' enthusiasm gave way to horror as he

witnessed the gross injustices committed by Leopold's colonial officials (Hoschild 106-107). In 1890, Williams settled in to write a letter outlining the problems with Leopold's government, expressing outrage at Leopold's endorsement of senseless killing, excessive cruelty, thievery, trickery, and kidnapping (Franklin 243). Though officials of numerous nationalities immediately discredited Williams to protect their own commercial interests in the Congo, his prophetic assessments would characterize Belgium's treatment of its colony for the next fifty years.

Bled dry for their rubber, ivory, and other raw materials, the Congolese people lived under the yoke of colonial oppression, watching Europeans appropriate their land and resources. Instrumental in this mission, as Williams briefly insinuates in his letter, was Leopold's supposed 'humanitarian' efforts to pacify and civilize the natives. Presenting his colony as an initiative of Christian charity, Leopold "used his financial power to deploy priests, almost as if they were soldiers" (Hoschild 134), thus strengthening his hold on the territory. Neither the first nor the last to utilize Christian ideology to promote empire, Leopold's active encouragement of collusion between religion and colonization solidly rooted missionaries in an operation to convert Africans both spiritually and culturally. Leopold's empire became the beneficiary of numerous Christian contributions from around the world as it continued publically parading under the façade of charity and humanitarianism. As many missionaries entered the Congo to aid in this undertaking, Christianity became complicit in what the world would later recognize as some of the most widespread and brutal human rights violations in history.

Despite the pervasive presence of missionaries committed to supporting the colonial mission, there were equal numbers of religious personnel dedicated to exposing Leopold's regime, as demonstrated by Williams' letter. Other missionaries followed in Williams' footsteps: William Shepard wrote articles exposing the senseless slaughter. E.V. Sjoblom reported on the

grotesque colonial practice of collecting African hands as status symbols (Hoschild 173).

Missionaries and religious societies were amongst the first organizations to recognize the horror of Belgium's colonial government and to begin pressing various government officials to pressure Leopold into improving conditions.

Attempting to confront the deeply problematic historical relationship between colonization and Christianity, Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* imports these tensions to the eve of Congolese independence through the tale of a 1950's Southern missionary family. Kingsolver's political allegory begins with the Price family: Ruth May, the youngest and most naïve, Rachel, the eldest, completely enmeshed in her own selfishness, Leah, one of the twins, initially eager to please her father, Adah, the deformed twin with a penchant for language, Orleanna the Georgia housewife, and Nathan, the fanatical Baptist preacher. Following Nathan into the deepest jungles of the Congo to a village called Kilanaga, the Prices quickly find themselves overwhelmed by their ignorance of Congolese culture, language, and way of life. The most imperceptive of the Prices, Nathan finds himself unable to minister to the villagers because of his absolute unwillingness to understand Kilanga's culture. Equipped with a sense of American superiority and Christian righteousness, Nathan relies on force and inherent authority to deliver his Christian message. Drawing from techniques employed by Leopold's missionary allies, Nathan's mission is doomed from the beginning. Lacking military support to compel conversion, Nathan instead establishes his religious methodology as tragically and comically out of place in an era of increasing Congolese agency.

Often criticized as "touchingly naïve" in her treatment of pre-colonial Africa (Kunz 296), and overly "romantic (and romantic Marxian)" (Fox 412) in her metaphors, Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, regardless, occupies a space of intense importance in postcolonial literature

for its insightful ability to deconstruct binary representations of religion. Indeed, the structure and epigraphs of *The Poisonwood Bible* demonstrate Kingsolver's attention to Christianity as an ideological body capable of producing multiple interpretations. Christianity inherently is neither good nor bad but becomes so in the hands of its possessor. While Kingsolver undeniably condemns Nathan Price's fanaticism and American superiority complex, she also acknowledges the importance of Christian contributions in Africa. Through the kindly voice of the benevolent Brother Fowles, Leah Price's religious transformation, and in her own structural nod to Biblical scripture, Kingsolver provides examples of Christianity as challenging the status quo. Ultimately, Kingsolver's novel optimistically suggests that despite a past marred with bloodshed and criminality, Christianity, when tempered with attitudes of tolerance and acceptance may be reappropriated for the empowerment of disenfranchised colonial peoples.

## Chapter 1

### Nathan Price: Missionary Tragicomedy

*Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ... You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*

*(Matt. 7:3-5)*

The remnant of a historically exploitative collaboration between Christianity and colonization, Reverend Nathan Price, of Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, arrives on the eve of Congolese independence, ready to spread the light of God and civilization. Armed with fierce racism, an enormous American superiority complex and a misplaced sense of his own importance, Nathan Price approaches his Christian mission as a military operation. Entering what he believes to be enemy territory filled with savagery and sacrilege, Nathan refuses to learn the local language, to understand Congolese tradition, or to engage in any kind of non-didactic exchange with the villagers. Nathan pairs the need to Westernize Kilangan culture with his spiritual obligation to save souls, reaching back to ideological and methodological practices of his nineteenth century missionary predecessors. Attempting to inject American culture and Christianity by force, Nathan as a 1950's American missionary lacks the military support enjoyed by the missionaries of High Imperialism and thus his archaic techniques earn him only disdain in the eyes of the villagers, and eventually, in the eyes of his family. His numerous religious blunders, the results of ignorance and incompetence, place him on the fringes of society and discount any importance of his religious message. Completely contemptible in his

exaggerated ethnocentric displays, Nathan Price quickly emerges as Kingsolver's case against the particular kind of Christianity that advocates for a merger between religion and the politics of empire.

From the moment Nathan enters the narrative periphery, Kingsolver describes him with undeniable irony and bitterness. Through both the conscious and unconscious criticisms in each of the five narrative voices, Kingsolver constructs a multi-perspectival portrait of Nathan's unflinching fanaticism. At first enamored with her father, Leah gushes praise for the man she sees as God's right hand. A master of language and a genius of deception, masking her own intellectual brilliance beneath an outwardly broken body, Adah, from the beginning, recognizes the dangerously seductive yet treacherously hateful implications of her father's religion. Rachel, self-centered and materialistic, focuses on Nathan's mission as an extended attempt to deprive her of teenage normalcy. The youngest daughter, Ruth May knows only fear, naively acknowledging that she must obey her father to earn heavenly admittance. The only voice told in retrospect, Orleanna sympathizes with the Congolese as a woman who also experienced firsthand, the forceful power of Nathan's Christianity. Leah records the first observations of Nathan as the Prices arrive in the Congo. As her mother and sisters shuffle off the airplane, weighed down by four layers of clothing, packets of packaged food, tools, and trinkets, Nathan brings "the Word of God—which fortunately weighs nothing at all" (Kingsolver 19). Still enamored with her father at this point, Leah's thoughts are unknowingly prophetic, epitomizing the later trajectory of Nathan's failed mission. This observation epitomizes the way Kingsolver appropriates character voices in order to provide her own commentary on the Reverend. Emphasis on the weight each of the women carries sharply contrasts to Nathan's spiritual weight, which as Leah states, is nothing. As a man who already purposefully separates himself from his

family in terms of religious carrying capacity, Kingsolver uses this as justification for denying Nathan a voice in the narrative. Alienating readers from Nathan, Kingsolver prevents any opportunity to understand or sympathize with Nathan's mission or ideological underpinnings. Kingsolver uses this metaphor at a very early moment in the novel to foreshadow the weightlessness and meaninglessness of Nathan's Christianity in the Price's new environment.

Barely settled in their new Kilangan residence, Nathan becomes fixated on proving God's endorsement of his mission. Believing the fastest way to gain souls is through an exploitation of the village's starvation conditions, Nathan attempts a series of miracles focused on using God's bounty as bribery. Meant to prove Christianity's practical power, Nathan's refusal to listen or learn from village tradition results in the miracles further alienating him from the people he wants to convert. Beginning with his attempt to grow a Southern garden in the middle of the jungle, Nathan's obdurate belief in the superiority of Western methodology enhances his appearance as a comedic and misplaced figure. With Leah's help, he clears a plot of land to plant a myriad of Georgian vegetables. Eager to partake in her father's mission Leah states, "It was to be our first African miracle... My father needs permission only from the Savior, who obviously is all in favor of subduing the untamed wilderness for a garden" (Kingsolver 36), revealing both Nathan's inflated sense of self-confidence but more importantly, providing a tangible example of her father's attempt to force the land to meet Western expectations. Like the opening lines that describe Nathan, Leah's admiration is absolute but through her remarks, Kingsolver conveys a sense of irony. Leah dubs the garden the 'first' of the African miracles that Nathan will perform suggesting that Nathan believes he can and will impress numerous Western improvements on the villagers via his demonstrations of American innovation. Leah's suggestion that this action is Jesus-endorsed, 'obviously,' demonstrates an inherent pairing of Christianity with paradigms of

Western civilization. Referring to Nathan's sensibilities as 'American exceptionalism,' Susan Strehle characterizes Nathan's attitude as "...arrogant, inflexible and passionately committed...Persuaded of Americans' election as the chosen people, he ignores local Congolese customs, resists help and information from villagers and strenuously insists on his own exceptional destiny" (Strehle 415). Critically linking Nathan's sense of Western superiority with traditional Old Testament ideas of God's chosen people, Strehle's idea of 'American exceptionalism' is a critical lens for understanding Nathan's belief in his ability to perform miracles and his frustration when his actions do not produce the results he desires.

Kingsolver also pointedly uses garden imagery to recall Biblical descriptions of Eden. By creating a miracle garden, Nathan hopes to present his own version of paradise, one characterized by subduing and taming the land using Western agriculture. However, because Nathan ultimately fails in his attempt to recreate God's abundance, Kingsolver makes this comparison mockingly. The first garden catastrophe occurs because Nathan ignores the housekeeper when she warns him that he must build dirt mounds to protect the garden from flooding. In his later attempt, Nathan fails to recognize the Congo as an environment distinct from rural Georgia and without any pollinators his crops wither. Nathan's inability to recreate a concrete example of God's paradise through force of will or religious dedication suggests that as a religious leader, Nathan is incapable even on a spiritual level, of reproducing or inspiring any kind of divine joy. The entire incident satirizes Nathan's religious approach. Because he is unwilling to accept that any native traditions may be more effective than his own imported methods, all his crops die, and he loses an opportunity to show his garden off as America's and hence God's triumph over Africa. Thus from the beginning, Nathan's inability to extricate his

political identity from his religious identity, cripples his missionary goals emphasizing his alienation from the environment he wants so badly to change.

In second of Nathan's attempts to win converts via food miracles he decides to reenact Jesus' multiplication of five Loaves and two Fish. The Biblical story emphasizes Christ's commitment to teaching and portrays the dedication of an early Christian following:

This is a lonely place, and the hour is now late; send them away, to go into the country and villages round about and buy themselves something to eat.' ...And he [Jesus] said to them 'How many loaves have you? Go out and see.' And when they had found out they said, 'Five and two fish.' Then he commanded them all to sit down by companies upon the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke the loaves and gave them to the Disciples and set before the people; and he divided the two fish among the all. (Mark 7:35-42)

The religious text conveys a certain sense of naturalness and ease to Jesus' actions. Throughout the episode he remains, calm, collected, and composed. Ironically, as Nathan attempts to mimic his role model, he manages to act in ways completely opposite to the morals and messages promoted by this New Testament story. Extremely desperate to prove his divine authority through a promotional demonstration, Nathan's effort to provide inverts rather than embodies the parable's intentions. As Adah glibly observes, Nathan appears more like a madman than the benevolent village savior:

Feed the belly and the soul will come...But after the underwater thunder what came was not souls but fish... He [Nathan] performed a backward version of the loaves and fishes trying to stuff ten thousand fish into fifty mouths, did the

Reverend Price. Slogging up and down the riverbank in trousers wet to the knees, his Bible in one hand and another stick full of fire-blackened fish in the other, he waved his bounty in a threatening manner. Thousands more fish jerked in the sun and went bad along the riverbanks. Our village was blessed for weeks with the smell of putrefaction. Instead of abundance it was a holiday of waste. (Kingsolver 70)

Using dynamite to recreate Christ's miracle, Nathan produces more food than there are mouths to feed, but also uses food as a form of bribery rather than as a symbol of community. The original tale exists as proof of God's ability to provide for those already deeply committed to the Christian mission. Sustenance, in the original loaves and fishes story, allows people to continue listening to Jesus preach but the food itself is not an incentive for religious participation. Nathan by contrast attempts to utilize an edible spectacle in the climate of destitute hunger as a method for winning converts. Nathan brandishes his 'bounty' in a 'threatening' manner, further distancing Nathan's actions from the parable's communion motif. The disparities between Price's actions and Jesus' actions are undeniable. Where Christ rewards followers, Price bullies. Where Christ creates plenty from what is already available, Nathan creates waste by disregarding traditional fishing techniques and by decimating the local ecosystem. The perversion of this Christian story reveals Nathan's intentions to be completely detached from the parable's true intent. More importantly, Nathan's methodology highlights his sense of 'American exceptionalism.' Not only does Price presume to configure himself as Christ in his new Congolese version of the loaves and fishes miracle, but he also performs the feat of providing without thought or care to the absolute waste involved. Nathan's approach to this religious display not only emphasizes his complete alienation from proper persuasive techniques but also

suggests an extremely troubling and hateful method for interpreting Biblical scripture. The contrast between Price and Jesus reveals Nathan as extremely distanced from the story's communally motivated behavior. He instead appears as a raving lunatic, menacingly patrolling the soon-to-be putrescent riverbanks.

In addition to highlighting Nathan's problematic approach to scriptural interpretation, this incident again emphasizes his preoccupation with the use of Western technology in religious rituals. Ironically using an explosive tool that symbolizes raw destructive power to perform a miracle of creation, Reverend Price's enactment of the loaves and fishes story reveals his irrevocable ideological connection between Western innovation and Christianity. Defining this marriage between political motivations and religious initiatives during the age of Leopold's imperialism, Jesus Varela-Zapata's arguments equally pertain to Nathan's missionary work. According to Varela-Zapata as Europeans expanded, they "were pledged to spread a superior civilization over the rest of the earth; this obviously included its main hallmark, the Christian faith. Thus God or at least some kind of spiritual referent seems to be behind most of the European plans to subdue alien peoples" (Varela-Zapata 99). Varela-Zapata's statement solidifies Nathan's connection to past missionary traditions that interpreted religious conversion as a simultaneous acceptance of Christianity and Western social norms. According to Nathan's beliefs, also evident in the gardening episode, God not only motivates this process of spiritual and cultural displacement but also actually endorses it. In Nathan's imagined scenario, God's triumph corresponds to the successful deployment of American explosives thus demonstrating that "religion and politics are not separate entities, but a powerful combined force used... to convert masses to believe that what is done in the name of democratic, Christian principles is done for the greater good" (Ognibene 20). First and foremost, Nathan's goal is to win over new

congregants but his actions reveal that simply accepting Christ as a savior is not enough. Villagers who embrace Christianity must also recognize and defer to the supremacy of Western technology and methodology. Nathan believes that his mission promotes the spiritual and societal well-being and sees “America as a redeemer nation. Above all, he believes in American instrumentalism, that ‘take-hold’ initiative to solve problems with technology” stressing the importance of American technological interventions in Nathan’s vision of civilization (Strehle 417). Beyond this full-hearted belief in American superiority, Nathan’s derives his agency as a cultural and spiritual authority precisely because he possesses the knowledge to wield tools unfamiliar to the Congolese villagers. Susan Strehle critically assesses the way “Kingsolver takes great care to root Nathan’s religion in American Puritanism buttressed by his confidence in the providential history of his nation. Americans are God’s chosen people...” suggesting the Nathan’s distorted performance of the loaves and fishes miracle serves as an assertion of his own dominance and the ascendancy of Western technology (Strehle 417). The waste, the ignorance and the haughtiness inherent to the entire fishing spectacle exemplify Kingsolver’s condemnation of Nathan’s interpretation and amalgamation of his fundamental religious beliefs with his ethnocentric sense of patriotism.

Nathan’s last attempt at a Christian miracle marks the final episode in Kingsolver’s gradual destruction of all Nathan’s ideological underpinnings. As the novel progresses, the miracles become increasingly revealing of the cracks in Nathan’s beliefs. The garden incident deconstructs the practicality of Nathan’s implementation of Western methods as a religious tool. The loaves and fishes scene further challenges Nathan’s assertions of Western technological superiority but also levels a comparison between Price and Jesus that reveals Nathan’s erred approach to enacting scripture. Stripped of any claims to methodological supremacy or religious

acuity, Kingsolver uses the ending miracle to reveal Nathan as a traitor of even the most basic American ideal—that is the sacredness of the nuclear family. As a Baptist, much of Nathan's religious belief centers on the Christian tradition of baptism. Identifying this particular ritual as the supreme goal and achievement of his missionary work, Nathan repeatedly attempts to persuade the village people to accept baptism. Rearranging religious holidays to best complement themes of baptism and encouraging the villagers to accept Jesus via river submersion, Nathan continues his quest, heedless of his congregants' protestations. However, in the last days of the Price women's time in Kilanga, Nathan finally secures an opportunity to welcome the village children into the Christian fold. Bitten by the notorious green mamba, Nathan's youngest daughter, Ruth May quickly submits to the venom and dies. Ruth May is mourned amongst the village children, popular for her ability lead games, regardless of the culture and language barriers. At this particular moment, Nathan finally receives the chance to baptize the villagers. Disillusioned and heart-broken, Leah watches as her father takes advantage of his daughter's death to 'save' the Congolese children: "The dust on our feet turned blood-colored and the sky grew very dark, while Father moved around the circle baptizing each child in turn, imploring the living progeny of Kilanga to walk forward into the light" (Kingsolver 375). Kingsolver takes great pains to convey that the children understand that Ruth May is dead but do not understand the implications of Nathan's religious actions. To the villagers, the children are mourning with the Prices, not making an intense religious commitment. Nathan appears as a despicable figure both because he carelessly exploits the village children's ignorance for his own religious gain and because he uses his five-year-old daughter's death to do so. Leah reflects that the earth began to look like blood, suggesting that Ruth May becomes Nathan's human sacrifice. Her body, her blood occupies the Congolese earth, a burden all the Prices must feel as the mud

splashes onto their feet. Nathan, however, imperceptively ignores his own culpability in the death of his youngest child and uses the occasion to accomplish a personal religious agenda. Nathan utilizes death and sacrifice as the barbaric setting for the village children's rebirth into Christianity signaling his crazed descent into the kind of savagery his 'religion' and his 'civilization' supposedly combated. His child's death becomes a religious triumph, demonstrating the depths to which Nathan's psychoses have perverted Christianity, cultural exchange, and filial obligation.

Nathan's continuous failure to reproduce even the most simplistic proof of Christian truth not only heightens the sense of alienation between him and the villagers but as the novel progresses, he demonstrates deeper misunderstandings and malpractices of Christianity. The miracles show Nathan's detachment from Congolese culture, and this ignorance repeatedly also appears in his religious rhetoric. Because of his deep disdain for the non-Western practices, he refuses to learn Kikongo, the local language, with any kind of proficiency. He relies on a translator to deliver his sermons and when he does use Kikongo, it's in the form of only a few superficial words meant to act more as an advertisement than actual attempt to increase the villager's access to Christianity. Nathan's inability to communicate effectively in the local language, on a very basic level, embodies the void that separates him from his converts. His ironic insertions of Kikongo words, frequently mispronounced, harm his mission more than help and unbeknownst to Nathan, his linguistic blunders reveal the sinister characteristics of his Christianity. Where the miracles concretely illustrate Nathan's decline into madness and ultimate rejection of all his supposed values, his linguistics, from the beginning of the novel, subtly reference the hate that underlies his Christianity.

Representing one of the greatest challenges to Christianity's globalization, Nathan, like his peers and predecessors, experiences the obstruction of translational and linguistic barriers. Unwilling to learn Kikongo for the benefit of his potential congregants, Price stubbornly continues to use English as his primary mode of communication. His linguistic ineptitude not only depicts the immeasurable importance of language in the understanding of Congolese life and culture but also reveals Nathan's mission as doomed because of his failure to make Christianity available on even the most basic level. Writing on issues of translation for missionaries in the early 1990's, the same time Kingsolver is writing *The Poisonwood Bible*, William H. Smalley recognizes the importance of a communicative bond both between God and followers and between clergy and congregation. He asserts that when translating, missionaries must keep the following ideas in mind:

The long association between Bible and translation and the drive to translate the Bible down through the centuries have been supported by at least four common theological assumptions: 1. God communicates with people through language... 2. People perceive/experience God through language... 3. People communicate with each other about God through language... 4. Such communicative events may take place across time, language and cultural differences. (Smalley 86)

All of these principles underscore the necessity of communication to engage in any type of religious conversation. Although both Smalley and Kingsolver cultivate religious ideology in an era extremely different from *The Poisonwood Bible's* setting, each writer reflects a consciousness to language as a religious portal. Smalley assumes that these assertions have governed centuries of Biblical translation. His ideas reflect a shift in Christian ideology with respect to missionary work, obligating religious personnel, not the congregants, to learn a new

language. According to Smalley, spreading God's Word dictates that the Bible and religion become a part of local language. Nathan's approach radically differs. Part of this same political climate, Kingsolver's ironic depictions of Nathan reveal that she too considers it Price's duty to assimilate to Kilanga's communicative modes. As Smalley and Kingsolver look forward to missionary movements that synthesize local tradition and Christianity, Nathan looks backward for an imperial missionary template, characterized by enforcement of Western institutions. By retaining English as his primary communicative medium, Nathan's linguistic engagement with the villagers remains superficial throughout the novel. Extremely critical of her father's farcical sermons, Adah notes her father's comical injection of a single Kikongo word: "Our father loves Daniel, the original Private Eye. *Tata* Daniel (he called him to make him seem like a local boy)..." (Kingsolver 71). Adah's observations indicate that Price's use of a familiar Kikongo title flirts with intentions to make the Biblical story and characters more accessible to the village churchgoers, but instead the insertion of 'Tata' appears more frivolous and superficial than helpful. Adah's explanation that 'Tata' makes Daniel seem like a local boy appears in parenthesis, syntactically emphasizing Nathan's humorously heavy-handed attempt to increase Christianity's appeal. In the same sermon Adah observes the translator, recognizing her father's powerlessness in the transmission of his own words:

He did not pause...smoothly the words rolled forward and I realized this slick schoolteacher could be saying anything under the sun. Our father would never be the wiser. *So they stoned the dame and married two more wives apiece and lived happily ever after.* (Kingsolver 72)

Entertainingly musing on Anatole's potential misrepresentation of Nathan's story, Adah implicitly reveals Nathan's assumption that the congregation receives a direct, unfiltered, and

unedited version of his sermon. The portrait of Nathan's reliance and naïve belief in his own ability to exercise dominance over the congregation, including the translator, subverts any of the authority he attempts to impose. Not only is he powerless to enforce his beliefs, but also because of the language barrier, he is powerless to effect the transmission of his speeches. Furthermore, the same barrier that renders Nathan communicatively ineffectual also prevents him from listening and perceiving the ridiculousness of his speech.

Beyond mere failure to establish lasting or meaningful points of cultural exchange with his Congolese congregants, Nathan's flagrant misuse of singular Kikongo words exacerbates the already considerable problem of communication. Rather than merely appearing ignorant and out of place, Nathan's repeated mispronunciation of the word 'Bangala' confirms Nathan's Christianity as a malicious rather than benign institution. Again the victim of his own linguistic insensitivity, Nathan's ignorant foray into native language costs him more congregants than it converts. Adah examines her father's idiotic attempt to convey Christ's importance in the local language:

“Tata Jesus is Bangala!” declares the Reverend every Sunday at the end of his sermon. More and more mistrusting his interpreters, he tries to speak in Kikongo. Bangala means something precious and dear. By the way he pronounces it, it means poisonwood tree. Praise the Lord, hallelujah my friends! For Jesus will make you itch like nobody's business. (Kingsolver 276)

Adah's remarks here provide critical insight for understanding Nathan's continuous failure to garner any true, devoted converts. Unlike his early sermons that entirely rely on Anatole for transmittance and use Kikongo only as frivolous insertion, Nathan's progressive desperation tragically and comically urges him to push the boundaries of his local language skills. Nathan's

casual inclusion of a Kikongo word without the committed attempt to grasp the correct pronunciation convolutes his Christian message, completely undermining his point. Kingsolver's inclusion of this tragic albeit humorous scene again points to Nathan's embodiment of the ignorant and uncompromising American attitudes. Nathan's ironic confusion of 'precious' and 'poisonwood' overtly suggests that Price's form of Christianity is indeed deleterious to his congregants. In attempting to convey the 'truth' of Christianity, Price inadvertently reveals the reality of his religious, political and social attitudes, all of which threaten to poison and weed out any traces of Kilanga's traditions.

Price's refusal to learn the Kikongo language is indicative of his larger rejection of Congolese culture. Though at first his ethnocentrism and narrow-mindedness only cost him the communicative space necessary to his Christian mission, the problem compounds as the novel progresses and like the attempted miracles, reveals Nathan's Christianity as extremely harmful. According to Kingsolver, "Nathan Price is a symbolic figure at its [The Poisonwood Bible's] center, suggesting many things about the way the U.S. and Europe have approached Africa with a history of cultural arrogance and misunderstanding at every turn" (HarperCollins). Because Nathan acts as a symbol of Western attitudes, his expression of Christianity at a linguistic level also bears the coloring of these attitudes. Nathan's removal from his cultural surroundings in terms of language and communication represent much larger and formidable religious and secular American attitudes. He fails to realize that he "is deaf to the truth just as he is deaf to the language nuances of the Congolese culture" and that his mission and message cannot succeed when they are so hostile and irrelevant to local culture (Ognibene 26). As suggested by Ognibene, Nathan loses agency as both a speaker and as a receptor. He can neither listen or discuss and thus is powerless to exert the divine changes to which he feels so committed.

Embodying Karl Marx's statement that "History repeats itself first as tragedy second as comedy," Nathan pitifully attempts to use the same racist methods employed by colonial missionaries but does so at the precise moment that the Congo declares itself free from European hands. The blinding preconceptions with which Nathan approaches the Congo render him ineffectual. Without any knowledge of the culture he wants to civilize, Nathan, along with his missionary message, becomes a part of the periphery of Kilanga's society, evidence that his imperial methods no longer hold sway in the newly independent Congo.

Nathan's problems with language serve as an important thematic bridge between *The Poisonwood Bible* and two other influential novels depicting colonial Africa: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Citing both novels in her bibliography, Kingsolver draws from these texts both because of their respective statuses in the canon of English literature written on Africa but also because of the similar colonial representations. Conrad's protagonist, Marlow, provides powerful insight into the colonial psyche as he observes the horror and the seductiveness of the Congo during Leopold's iron imperial rule. Written later, Achebe's novel in many ways comments on Conrad's portrayal of Africans. Illustrating the Ibo culture of Nigeria, Achebe focuses on the intricacies of African culture before European intervention, refuting Marlow's assertions that Africans are no better than grunting, rutting beasts. While Conrad's protagonist denies Africans the sophistication of their own language, Achebe's novel addresses the importance of Ibo language as the embodiment of an extremely beautiful culture. Famously commenting on Conrad's novel in his essay "An Image of Africa," Achebe says, "It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the 'rudimentary souls' of Africa" (An Image of Africa 6). Suggesting that Conrad's exoticism the Congolese and racism towards Africans prevent him from giving the natives

legitimate languages, Achebe's observation demonstrates that to give written legitimacy to native voice represents a profoundly threatening idea to ethnocentric Westerners. Kingsolver's comfort in referencing the tensions between Conrad and Achebe's novels, again circles back to Nathan's place in a legacy of complicity between colonization and religion. Nathan draws on a very specific tradition that approaches Africa as a hostile place, incapable of cultivating the level of culture present in Western societies. Elaine R. Ognibene takes note of this historical arc in Kingsolver's novel: "Although the locales shift and the specific religious affiliations change, one recurring theme crosses culture and class lines, the men all see themselves as carriers of the 'Word,' superior to the populations they want to convert" (Ognibene 21). Kingsolver's decision to appropriate and build on the themes explicated in Achebe's text and to refute the observations seen in Conrad's reveals an understanding of communication as a ubiquitous problem not just one limited to the Congolese or the Ibo. Kingsolver extrapolates incidents set originally in Nigeria and the nineteenth century Congo onto later missionary movements, illustrating the necessity of a communicative connection in all situations of cultural exchange.

Achebe's states that within Ibo culture "The art of conversation is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (*Things Fall Apart* 7). Conversational ability dictates allotment of social respect amongst the Ibo. Failing to engage in this tradition signifies rudeness but more importantly, indicates a deep failure to grasp the traditions at the heart of the culture. Ironically, at the end of the novel, the district commissioner, a colonial official closely allied with the new church's civilizing mission states, "One of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words" (*Things Fall Apart* 206). Thus, one of main sources of cultural disconnection is the colonists' unwillingness to take part in a practice that essentially defines the complexities of Ibo society. Again, this example highlights

the importance of conversation and communication in cultural exchange. Kingsolver mirrors Achebe's attention to cultural transmission via language through Adah's appreciation for Kikongo. The only person in her family able to distinguish nuances in pronunciation, Adah easily recognizes the gulf that exists between Americans and the Congolese because of linguistic differences:

Dundu is a kind of antelope. Or it is a small plant of the genus Veronia. Or a hill or a price you have to pay. So much depends on tone of voice. One of these things is what our family has coming to us. Our Baptist ears from Georgia will never understand the difference. (Kingsolver 175)

Adah's attention to Kikongo's variability pays homage to the language in the same way that Achebe's proverbs emphasize the importance of Ibo conversation. The tones and sounds of each Kikongo utterance carry the weight of the word's meaning. The artistry of this particular culture is in the ability to distinguish the auditory and oral nuances of each syllable. Adah's comment that pairs 'Baptist' and 'ears' as the reason that the Prices cannot understand these linguistic intricacies, proposes a religious dimension to their cultural insensitivity. As natives of Georgia too, the Prices adhere to a specific dialect of English and a regionally specific way of hearing. The family members, particularly Nathan, are not universal people but deeply embedded in a particular American locale, which handicaps their respective abilities to recognize Kikongo's intricacies. Not an overt criticism of Christianity as a whole, Adah specifically references the Baptist denomination, a sect associated throughout the novel with Nathan's unflinching fundamentalism and unyielding religiosity. In doing so, Adah distinguishes Georgian Baptists both geographically and religiously, from other Christian sects. Adah also reveals an intricate and entwined relationship between ethnocentric Christianity and human physiological processes.

Christianity, for people like Nathan, becomes an inherent part of the physical process of hearing and processing information. Adah implies that Nathan's multiple cultural biases become ingrained in every aspect of his life; he will never possess the ability to appreciate Kikongo as she does.

Only one amongst the legions of missionaries intent on civilizing through Christianity and cultural erasure, Nathan Price's attempts to import colonial techniques into an era of increasing African independence, solidify him as a pitifully farcical figure. Convinced of his own cultural and religious supremacy, Nathan's ethnocentric approach and ultimate failure in his missionary work reveal that these imperial methods no longer function as mechanisms of cultural exchange. Critically undermining Nathan's authority by gradually revealing the cracks in his proverbial armor, Kingsolver illustrates Nathan as an offender of every sacred ideal he professes to protect. His technology fails to enhance his Christian quest, his scriptural interpretations undermine Christian principles, and his fanaticism offends even the sanctity of the family. Thus Nathan's particular kind of Christianity, in Kingsolver's view, not only renders him inappropriate and unqualified as any kind of religious authority but also reveals the deep, unabated evil inherent to Nathan's approach that rejects any kind of fluidity, compromise, or common space for mutual cultural exchange.

## Chapter Two

### Deconstructing Hate: The ‘Unmissionary’

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.*

*(Luke 4:18)*

Though Barbara Kingsolver offers a harsh and condemning criticism of Nathan’s religiosity, she also provides a redemptive and progressive space for Christianity. Through a depiction of alternative Christian voices, Kingsolver establishes Nathan as only one thread in the tapestry of this religious tradition. First offering Brother Fowles as a tolerant alternative to Nathan’s haughty condemning attitudes, Kingsolver uses this character to assert that missionary work does not mandate fundamentalism or an uncompromising sense of Western superiority. Brother Fowles enacts his missionary role by providing relief to those in need. Distributing food, medicine, and supplies to the impoverished and the destitute without any expectation of religious recompense, Fowles demonstrates to the Price women, a Christian belief system founded on principles of brotherhood and community rather than on conversation and proselytizing. Increasingly disillusioned with her father’s Christianity, Brother Fowles’ impression resonates particularly strong in Leah Price’s mind. Brother Fowles becomes a template for social justice and communal obligation as Leah grows into an adult. Embracing an African identity, marrying an African man, and bearing African children, Leah becomes an ‘unmissionary,’ absorbing Congolese culture rather than imposing American tradition. Because she sees her father as the

exemplary missionary, Leah interprets her own role as ‘unmissionary’ as antithetical to her father’s. Leah, in many ways, becomes Fowles’ legacy, not Nathan’s. Her status as mother and political activist for African liberation configures Leah as a part of Christianity’s future in Africa. Both Leah and Fowles demonstrate Kingsolver’s assertion that Christianity possesses the potential to inspire social activism and societal betterment.

Despite only a short appearance in the novel, Brother Fowles immediately establishes himself as a puzzlingly paradoxical figure. He is white yet he marries a black woman. He is a Westerner yet he enjoys full membership in Kilangan society. He is a self-professed Christian yet demonstrates no desire to gain converts. From these conventionally irreconcilable traits, Kingsolver depicts a religious figure with an extremely different approach to missionary work. Much more effective than Nathan in gaining village respect, Fowles’ success stems from his valuation of native culture and from his decision to live and lead by humanitarian example. Adapting his lifestyle and spirituality to his new environment, Brother Fowles readily recognizes the values of Christianity already present in Congolese practices. As Kingsolver states in an interview, Brother Fowles “represent[s] Christian mission in a kinder voice. Christianity like every other major religion has a million different voices” (HarperCollins), thus his primary function in the narrative is to act as a Christian voice different from Nathan Price’s. Particularly in his scriptural discussions with the Price children and later, debates with Nathan, Fowles reveals a marked attempt to concentrate on the Biblical passages that possess the most relevance to Congolese society. Fowles represents a religious movement that constantly seeks to maintain Christianity’s pertinence to contemporary society and setting. Avoiding the pitfalls of the archaic missionary techniques employed by Nathan, Fowles presents the possibility for Christianity to grow and act as a productive force in any environment, including Kilanga.

To establish Fowles as an authority, Kingsolver first demonstrates his expertise in Biblical scholarship. The first time the Price family meets the elusive Fowles, he engages first with the children and later with Nathan in a series of scriptural dialogues and debates. These conversations reveal the character of a deeply contemplative and spiritual man, and unlike critic William Purcell asserts, the narrative does not depict Fowles as pantheist or mere devotee of nature. Claiming that Fowles mimics St. Francis of Assisi in his appreciation of nature, Purcell argues that Fowles fails to compellingly recreate the Saint's arresting Christian lifestyle: "Fowles' Christianity is not a religious faith but an ethical code," which lacks an appreciation for Christ's martyrdom or resurrection (Purcell 95). Despite Purcell's assertions, however, Fowles displays attention to Christ's importance in both his appearance and in his conversations with Nathan. Fowles "fingers the cross around his neck" (Kingsolver 248), a reminder of Christ's sacrifice, as he extensively discusses the New Testament with Nathan Price. His familiarity with Romans, and the Acts of the Apostles show a focus on New Testament literature, a defining characteristic of Christian scholarship. Purcell also suggests that Fowles supplants the worship of one, true God by worshipping images of nature as God in and of themselves. Nature, according to Purcell, becomes Fowles' God rather than a manifestation of God's power: "For Fowles nature does not simply point to God; it is God" (Purcell 102). By refusing to acknowledge Fowles as a true Christian, Purcell discounts Fowles' position as a religious authority. Purcell's claims, however, reflect a flawed and extremely problematic interpretation of Kingsolver's text. While Fowles does exhibit a heightened appreciation for nature, comparable to the Congolese villagers, he maintains an understanding of nature as evidence of God's power and presence. During Fowles' visit to the Price home, Rachel observes his conversation with her younger sister Leah. When Fowles tells Leah, "When I want to take God at his word exactly, I take a peep out

the window at his creation. Because that darling, he makes fresh for us every day without a lot of dubious middle managers,” he not only asserts his belief in God’s power over nature but also suggests that visual proof of God’s existence surpasses the importance of scriptural study (Kingsolver 248). God ‘makes’ nature everyday; creation is ‘his.’ Fowles pointedly attaches possession to nature, solidifying the belief that God controls the natural surroundings. Fowles does not worship natural elements not as individual deities but rather he appreciates and rejoices in them as perhaps the one transmission of God’s will, power and word unfettered by ‘dubious middle managers.’ While Fowles’ focus on Jesus is much more subtle, he displays clear devotion to the Christian mission and to Christ, but chooses to outwardly express his beliefs through natural imagery and attention to God’s creative powers. Indeed because of this unconventional approach, Fowles becomes a much more effective religious figure because of his ability to effectively synthesize Christian ideology with the cultural importance of land and nature.

Fowles’ conversation with Leah not only establishes him as a deeply religious man, but in the same breath also reveals a bilayered criticism of Nathan’s Christianity. First, Fowles’ assertions that scripture passes through many intermediaries, again touches on issues of language and translation. As Fowles astutely points out, “Was it a camel that could pass through the eye of a needle more easily than a rich man or a coarse piece of yarn? The Hebrew words are the same but which one did they mean? If it’s a camel, the rich man might as well not try. But if it’s the yarn, he might well succeed with a lot of effort, you see?” (Kingsolver 248). Providing a concrete example of translational ambiguity, Fowles reveals the importance that one word plays in the interpretation of Biblical scripture. The passage that Fowles alludes to, Mark 10:25, records Jesus’ teachings on salvation and heaven. The translation of ‘camel’ versus ‘coarse yarn’ becomes the crux for the message’s intent, mediating between possibility and impossibility. This

situation discussed between Fowles and Leah recalls Nathan's numerous problems with translation, which similarly communicate intentions opposite of what Nathan intends. Trading 'beloved' for 'poisonwood' when using the Kikongo word 'bangala,' Nathan promotes the image of Christ as an infectious, poisonous presence rather than a loving father. Nathan muddies his Christian message, placing him amongst the ranks of the 'dubious middle managers' Fowles so detests. For Fowles, Nathan's sermons signify yet another step down in the gradual degradation of the Bible's original text and intent, harming more than helping the spread of Christianity. Instead, as Fowles suggest to Leah, nature presents the possibility of experiencing and enjoying God's power without the problems and pitfalls of translational ambiguity.

Closely focusing on the religious value in studying and appreciating nature, Fowles' attention to his surroundings as a religious manifestation, demonstrates his concern for Christianity's accessibility, a goal clearly at odds with Nathan's missionary approach. For Brother Fowles, nature exemplifies divinity and thus to be in tune with nature is itself a spiritual act. Fowles clearly observes and appreciates this trait in the villagers, defending their lifestyle in a religious debate with Nathan, using Biblical passages on nature. Fowles attempts to explain to Price that he experiences the best response to Christianity when he uses natural proverbs because the Congolese "...have such an intelligence and then great feeling for the world around them" (Kingsolver 252). Fowles complements Congolese attention to the divine while also asserting Christianity's relevance to daily village life, offering valuable insight to Nathan, which, of course, he ignores. Fowles' use of natural proverbs and passages stems not only from a desire to use examples that make sense in the context of Congolese life but also because he believes that the villagers already engage in the type of natural worship that epitomize pure Christianity. His belief in nature as a tangible representation of God's word and his attention to the importance of

communing with nature, both represent ideas that directly contest Nathan's desire to 'subdue' the land. Nathan's failed Southern garden and foray into dynamite fishing demonstrate the extent to which Nathan's religious practices separate him from nature. Because of this hostile and domineering approach to the land, Nathan becomes a figure, in Fowles' Christianity, even less capable of divine reception than the supposed pagans he attempts to convert. The contrast between the two men again becomes a measuring stick for Nathan's incompetence and introduces Fowles as a figure better equipped to integrate Christianity with local tradition. Because Fowles admires and respects the village culture, he is better prepared to understand the instances where Christianity holds practical sway in Congolese life. Unlike Price, Fowles' ability to identify common ground allows him to find ways to connect with the Congolese rather than accepting convoluted rationale that positions Africans as enemies of God. The attempt to cultivate relationships and deepen his understanding of native tradition not only earns him more respect in the eyes of the villagers but also makes him a more effective emissary of Christianity.

Brother Fowles becomes a champion for native culture and tradition, defending the villagers' inherent spirituality. Fowles says to the Price women. "Everything they [the Congolese] do is with one eye to the spirit. When they plant their yams and manioc, they're praying. When they harvest, they're praying. Even when they conceive their children, I think they're praying" (Kingsolver 247). Pointedly utilizing the word 'spirit,' Fowles allies Congolese and Christian religious traditions by alluding to the Christian concept of 'holy spirit.' Again Fowles asserts the presence of an inherent spirituality and in doing so defends native culture in the language of Christianity. Fowles becomes even more explicit in his defense and admiration for the villagers in the same conversation with Leah, "I think he [God] must be prouder of the Congo than just about any place He ever made" (Kingsolver 247). Fowles' use of the word

‘prouder’ indicates that Fowles believes the Congo to be God’s triumph, even more so than Western nations. His assertion defies Nathan’s and others’ claims that connect Christianity with Western lifestyle, technology, and civilization. The Congolese do not require American development to experience the ‘right’ kind of spirituality, nor do they require Nathan’s formulaic, irrelevant and fundamental scriptural readings because every Congolese action remains irrevocably linked with the land and communion with nature and thus, for Fowles, with God. Fowles interprets even the most mundane of acts to contain a vast amount of spiritual significance. While Nathan’s Christian “love” limits itself to Sundays in his makeshift church, the Congolese find God in each daily chore. Fowles’ approach to Congolese tradition and Christianity as complementary rather than adversarial practices reveals both stunning insight and a progressive approach to Christianity as a space of commonality and communication between Western and African cultures. His defense of native customs in the language of Western Christianity becomes an important step in the process of shaping religion as a positive force to be appropriated for the empowerment of the Congolese people.

In addition to more closely allying himself with nature, Fowles reflects a more progressive interpretation of Biblical passages with respect to their involvement in the colonial process. Challenging Price’s interpretations of hostility towards the Congolese, Fowles instead sees the passages as an intervention into Western position in Africa. Fowles analyzes a passage in Romans that uses a tree metaphor to characterize the relationship between God and followers. While Price interprets the passage as one that clearly establishes the Congolese as ‘enemies of God,’ Fowles uses the passage to draw attention to the interconnectedness of both Western and African culture, while also pointedly referring to both his and Nathan’s respective alien statuses in Africa. He says to Nathan, “Do you get the notion we are the branch that’s grafted on here,

sharing in the richness of these African roots?" (Kingsolver 252). Here, Fowles makes two important assertions. First, he draws attention to the African roots, or the bounty of the land, shared by the villagers and the Prices alike. Despite Nathan's interpretation that these passages position him at odds with the native people, Brother Fowles suggests that the imagery of the grafted branch implies the presence of common roots and the common needs of every individual branch. Fowles combats the view of Africans as primitive and antagonistic to the Christian mission through his repeated assertions of commonality. He encourages Price to acknowledge the villagers as brothers and equals rather than a group of savages requiring the strong arm of American Christian intervention. On a second, subtler level, Fowles accuses Price that his 'grafted branch' in Kilanga takes nutrients from African roots, presumably drawing resources away from the African trees. Though Fowles never explicitly cites Nathan's presence as a burden on the village, the family's constant struggle to stay afloat after the missionary organization stops their aid, forces the village to repeatedly offer help and resources to prevent a white family from dying. More importantly, the microcosm of Kilanga expands onto the Congo's fate as a whole. Like the Price family's presence in Kilanga, Western presence in the Congo acts as the graft of an alien tree. The tree taps into the resources that the Congo as a whole needs to survive. Even a seemingly harmless and idealistic reading of the Bible reveals much deeper political implications.

Serving as an important alternative to Nathan's Baptist fundamentalism is only one of Fowles' key functions within the narrative. His innovative approach to Christianity becomes part of Leah's motivation for religious transformation. Always the daughter seeking her father's approval, Leah enters the story as a girl completely naïve to Nathan's destructive attitudes. She believes in his righteousness and in the divine importance of their missionary work. As she

experiences life in the Congo and witnesses her father's continued religious failure, Leah begins questioning the legitimacy of her father's Christianity. As she feels the pangs of daily hunger, her family's desperation, and her father's unyielding fanaticism, heedless of the consequences for his wife and children, Leah begins to doubt Nathan's simplistic assessment of Christianity as a basic system of exchange. The Congo teaches her that good deeds are not always rewarded with good fortune and that bad deeds often go unpunished. Alienated from the religious foundations that have defined every aspect of her adolescent life, Leah attempts to confront her confusion:

All my life I've tried to set my life in his footprints, believing if only I stayed close enough to him those same clean simple laws would rule my life as well. That the Lord would see my goodness and fill me with light. Yet with each passing day I find myself farther away. There's a great holy war going on in my father's mind, in which we're meant to duck and run and obey orders and fight for all the right things, but I can't make out the orders or even tell which side I'm on exactly... If his decision to keep us here in the Congo wasn't right, then what else might he be wrong about? It has opened up in my heart a sickening world of doubts and possibilities where before I had only faith in my father and love for the Lord. (Kingsolver 244)

In her reflections, Leah repeatedly refers to an ambiguous 'he,' which could mean her father or God. While the passage's tone suggests that Leah most probably intends for 'he' to mean her father, the purposeful ambiguity in this pronoun reveals the extent to which Leah has confused and combined God and Nathan. Leah believed childishly for her entire life preceding this moment in the novel, that her father's will and God's will were one and the same. She unconsciously reveals this understanding in her diction. The confusion of pronouns implies that

for Leah to doubt Nathan is also to doubt God. In this passage Leah totters on the edge of her own religious awakening as she expresses disillusionment with Nathan. Critically, it is precisely at this moment that Fowles enters Leah's life, forcing her to consider a new kind of religious consciousness. His example galvanizes Leah to embrace a more tolerant form of spirituality. Answering Leah's need for a type of religion that offers a more sensible, less fundamental approach to the world, Fowles motivates Leah's devotion to a kind of hybrid Christianity, emphasizing the active relief of suffering through humanitarian efforts.

As she carries Fowles' ideas of community service into her adult life, Leah adds her own burgeoning ideas of social justice as religious components. Following common themes of postcolonial stories of missionary families, Leah's maturity corresponds to the discovery of her own social responsibility:

The child who functions as the hero or heroine grows up seeing herself connected to the land and identifying with the growth or independence of the country which usually occurs at the moment of pubescent adolescence—Coming of age literally also becomes synonymous with coming into an awareness of race/ethnicity/identity or nationalism (Jussawalla 15).

Unlike her sisters, Leah remains in Africa and continues to pursue a spiritual Christianity that eludes the other women in her family. Adah finds comfort in reciting the periodic table. Orleanna attempts to find comfort in her gardening and through imagined conversations with Ruth May. Rachel remains forever self-involved and enmeshed in her materialistic attitudes. Only Leah stays and attempts to reconcile her skin, her national heritage, and her religion with her desire to repair and rebuild Africa. Leah marries Kilanga's schoolteacher, Anatole, and fights alongside him as he advocates for a Congolese government free from meddling American and European

hands. Even as someone who outwardly rejects the values of her childhood, Leah continues to reach back to her Christian roots, “Did America shift under my feet, or did it stand still while I stomped along my road toward whatever I’m chasing, following a column of smoke through my own Exodus?” (Kingsolver 467). Leah’s use of ‘exodus’ as a word to describe her life’s journey alludes to the Old Testament story of the Hebrew Liberation from Egyptian slavery. After leaving Egypt, the Hebrews wander through the desert in search of God’s promised land, “And the Lord went before them by day and in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way...” (Exod. 13.21). Leah follows her own ‘pillar of smoke’ and uses a Biblical metaphor to convey her continued struggle to find and follow God. This is important both because Leah sees her life as a religious quest but also because the comparison shows Leah’s identification with the story of a formerly enslaved people. In a familial context, Leah liberates herself from her father’s religion and patriarchal authority. In the context of her chosen Congolese nationality, Leah’s understanding of oppression illustrates how deeply and personally Leah feels the scars of racism, exploitation and colonization as she internalizes the suffering of an entire continent. The Exodus story also allows Leah to hope for a better Congolese future through implications of a promised land. In the context of the Congo, a promised land for Leah and Anatole means a place of justice, freedom and equality, which is dictated, by the people rather than Western puppeteers. While Biblical images of Exodus carry the sorrowful weight of a slave history, they also contain hints of optimism; though Leah remains disillusioned with America and Nathan’s Christianity, she does associate following God, with the positive ideal of moving forward, toward the Promised Land. Leah’s Christianity, much like Fowles’ infuses spirituality with a desire for a better future by attending to the needs of the disenfranchised.

Leah's new religion becomes a life-long struggle to find her own forgiveness for the burden of her white skin. Towards the end of her life Leah reflects that, "That to be here [Africa] without doing everything wrong requires a new agriculture, a new sort of planning, a new religion. I am the unmissionary as Adah would say, beginning each day on my knees asking to be converted. Forgive me, Africa, according to the multitudes of thy mercies" (Kingsolver 525). The new type of religion Leah follows occupies a position so different from Nathan's Christianity, that she must be converted rather than simply amend her beliefs. The verb 'convert' signifies Leah's perception of her own transformation as extreme; yet ironically, Leah continues to revert to her prayer traditions as a Baptist minister's daughter. In this context, however, Leah replaces the traditional noun, 'God' with 'Africa.' The appropriation and manipulation of this prayer again reveals that Leah uses Christianity as a way of repenting for complicity in the sins against Africa. No longer a plea for divine forgiveness, Leah's amended prayer asks forgiveness from people, from a continent. Leah's religion finds root in concern for humanity and dedication to the abolition of injustice. Though obviously still concerned about a religion's capacity to provide her with the forgiveness she craves for her whiteness and complicity, Leah's ability to reconfigure her father's oppressive form of Christianity shows the religion's potential for evolution. This new Christianity emphasizes the need for earthly forgiveness and individual accountability rather than searching for religious recompense in the form of heavenly salvation. The salvation that Leah seeks is to be released from the bondage of her skin color because of its association with exploitation, but she likewise seeks salvation for the Congo.

This same quotation helps to reveal Brother Fowles' role in Leah's religious progression. Leah associates new religion with new agriculture. The naturalistic images of farming evoke both Brother Fowles' suggestion that nature represents the purest form of divinity and again

recall Nathan Price's failed attempts at gardening. To avoid doing everything wrong; Leah must search for a 'new agriculture.' Leah teaches her small class how to cultivate crops that continue to grow and flourish in the African climate reflecting a desire to live in harmony with the land. Leah's instruction references Nathan's attempted vegetable garden but she ironically inverts her father's intentions. Leah circles back on her childhood enthusiasm to subdue the land, only now free of Nathan's influence, she preaches harmony not dissonance with her surroundings. Industry must meld itself to the land and not vice versa rejecting traditional colonial ideas of 'civilization.' Although she teaches in a secular location, not as a missionary, she still considers herself an 'unmissionary' in this process, gradually writing over the evils of colonization.

By referring to herself as the 'unmissionary' Leah establishes a position opposite to what she considers to be a missionary, which is a movement she presumably associates with her father and with others like him. She becomes everything that Nathan Price was not. She attempts to fully integrate into Congolese culture, internalizing a colonial past even as she tries to assuage guilt for her skin color. She never sees her father again nor does she attempt to replicate any of his religious goals in her adult life Yet her attachment to the term 'missionary' remains evident. Leah credits Adah with inventing the title 'unmissionary,' but it is she who repeats it, deeming it appropriate for her lifestyle. In a context where numerous nouns could suffice, she continues to persevere on Christianity, emphasizing Leah's lifelong personal attempt to articulate and live with a kind of spirituality that rejects Nathan's values and reaches toward individual empowerment. Leah demonstrates constant awareness to the roles of missionaries in Africa:

It's the only time I get homesick. When America lands on my doorstep in missionary guise. There are some others that didn't go back like me... They're so unlike Father. As I bear the emptiness of a life without his God, it's a comfort to know these soft-spoken

men who organize hospitals under thatched roofs, or stoop alongside village mamas to plant soybeans or rig up electrical generators for a school. (Kingsolver 435)

Leah says that America comes to her in ‘missionary guise’ yet pointedly avoids using ‘missionary’ to describe those that stay to perform community service. The vague reference to these people as ‘some others’ implies that the concrete noun should read ‘some other missionaries’ but this purposeful distancing from referring to herself or those that she admires as ‘missionaries; reveals Leah’s deeply negative associations with this word. She avoids its usage to detach herself and differentiate the people ‘like’ her from the kind of missionary work she associates with her father. Leah further distances herself from Nathan’s religion by saying that she lives without ‘his’ God. Attaching possessiveness to ‘God’ specifies that Leah still lives with God just not the same version of God Nathan presents. The final step in Leah’s unmissionary movement is to completely dissociate herself and people interested in using religion as a communal space from those that use Christianity as a tool of oppression and suppression. Leah’s ‘unmissionary’ movement marks a distinct evolution in the course of Christianity. The ideology to which Leah and others like her subscribe focuses on community service and brotherhood, pushing Christianity to become an institution advocates for current change, and immediate betterment.

Only two amongst the many faces of Christianity that appear within the Poisonwood Bible, Fowles and Leah represent a different voices than that offered by Nathan Price. Fowles promotes his ideas through a small relief effort, which inspires Leah Price’s startling transition from Nathan’s eager follower to her role as an ‘unmissionary.’ Both these figures represent a progressive approach to Christianity that utilizes religion as a mechanism of social betterment and societal change. Through Leah and Fowles, Kingsolver proposes that although there is no

room for Nathan's religion, Christianity can still act as the motivating force for the formation of a global community committed to establishing brotherhood, to reaching for equality, and to making reparations for historical wrongs.

### Chapter 3

#### Kingsolver's Third Church: Creation of a Global Community

*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

*(Matthew 22:39)*

Like her heroized characters, Brother Fowles and Leah Price, Kingsolver presents a new type of Christianity in the structuring and epigraphs of *The Poisonwood Bible*. Titling each of the novel's individual sections after the name of a Biblical or Apocryphal book, Kingsolver presents the multiplicity of Biblical interpretation and its capacity to connect to a variety of temporal and geographic situations, including that of the Congo. Although critics are quick to point out the narrative elements of the novel that elucidate Kingsolver's views on Christianity, very little scholarship exists on her use of the Bible itself as a structural template. Reflecting Kingsolver's goal to complicate, problematize, and challenge traditional Western approaches to Christianity, the title acts as a preface to the novel's organization, which plays on the tension between fundamental and progressive scriptural interpretation. By combining 'Poisonwood' and 'Bible,' Kingsolver both transports Biblical ideas to an African setting while also acknowledging Christianity's potentially toxic undercurrents. On one hand the title carries a very negative connotation, which the novel later explains as rooted in Christianity's complicity with oppression and colonization. On the other, Kingsolver's obvious use of Christianity throughout her political allegory condemning the historical and contemporary treatment of Africa, suggests that Kingsolver intends to do something new, to say something different about what religion can offer Africa. Barbara Kingsolver wants to "be an engaged writer, responsible citizen, and a

positive moral force,” indicating that she aims for her novel to serve an instructional purpose (Kerr 10). Inspiring a closer examination of Biblical passages and themes in her epigraphs, Kingsolver demonstrates that fundamental readings may be reinterpreted to serve as an expressive mode that advocates for the understanding and agency of postcolonial peoples.

Preparing to write *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver “read, and re-read daily, from the King James Bible” in order to fully understand the beliefs, traditions, and speech of the Price family (HarperCollins). The King James Bible, like Kingsolver’s Kikongo dictionary, became a portal to one of the world’s most influential languages. Termed “the noblest monument of English prose” and considered the “authorized version of English-speaking peoples,” this particular edition of Biblical text asserted English as a language of Christianity (Preface to the Revised Standard Version xi). Providing textual access to many more people, the King James Bible, as the title suggests, was also commissioned as a tribute to England’s stability and prowess. Thus, the King James Version carries an assertion of empire and the insertion of English into the Christian linguistic canon. Aware of this textual history, Kingsolver’s choice to take her epigraphs from this translation is an important one. As Ngugi wa Thiong’o observes, “Language carries culture and culture carries the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world,” thus by using ‘King James language’ in her epigraphs, Kingsolver draws from a text that inherently legitimizes seventeenth century English culture; one which valued expansionism, empire, white superiority and commercial power and global dominance (Hawley 134). The text used most frequently by missionaries, even without additionally injected racism, imbued colonial peoples with a sense of the legitimacy of their subservience and oppression under the rule of imperial power.

Deeply concerned with exposing the textual foundations allying God with colonial initiatives, Kingsolver challenges the sacredness and authenticity of the King James Biblical text. As Brother Fowles astutely observes, the Bible contains many translational ambiguities and errors. The original King James Bible was “based upon a Greek text that was marred by mistakes,” and although late nineteenth century revisers had access to many different versions of the Greek Biblical text, they lacked “the resources, which, discovered within the past eighty years, have afforded for understanding the vocabulary, grammar and idioms” (Mays xi). Kingsolver’s challenge to the authority of the widely revered King James text represents her intent to contest conventionally sacred elements of Western Christianity. By defying one of the most institutionalized texts in Christianity, Kingsolver expands this questioning to other popular Christian claims. Knocking the King James Bible off of its proverbial literary pedestal, Kingsolver appropriates a text associated with imperial initiatives in order to refute colonial authority rather than endorse it. Her epigraphs, although taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible, defy the text’s political intent, and deny it’s claims to authority demonstrating the interpretive malleability, and changeability of even the most traditional religious texts and ideas.

Outside her criticism of one particular text’s intentions, Kingsolver also critiques the entire concept of one single, uniform Bible. Rearranging the books of the Canonical Bible and including books from the Apocrypha, Kingsolver demonstrates her desire to refute the Bible as a static text. In creating her own Biblical order as a part of *The Poisonwood Bible*’s structure, Kingsolver mimics ancient Christian practices that allowed individual sects to worship from their own versions of sacred texts. Written by many different authors and in many different times and places, the Bible did not become a single, coherent ‘book’ until around the fifth century. The

Alexandrinus Codex, one of the earliest known editions of the Bible in its current form, attempted to establish a singular canon and ordering of individual Christian writings. Organizing Biblical books to suit her narrative and thematic goals, Kingsolver feels comfortable dismissing some of the books that she finds irrelevant while emphasizing others. In this way, Kingsolver acts as an authorial Fowles, keeping the essentials, discarding the extraneous. By imitating the textual flexibility of earlier forms of Christianity, Kingsolver remembers that the Bible began as a collection of texts that answered specific and individual needs. Kingsolver “not only uses the names of Biblical books for some section headings, but also ‘redacts’ material from several sources much as the compilers of Scripture have done, enriching the story in the process.” (Austenfeld 295). Kingsolver gives herself the authority to redefine the Bible in a way that compliments her novel’s motifs and desires for religious reformation. *The Poisonwood Bible’s* structure, thus, becomes an example for methods of maintaining Christianity’s relevance, in the context of both Western and non-Western cultures.

Kingsolver’s references to early Christianity also compliment her novel’s desire to expose and depose colonial authority. Tracing its ancestry to times of Roman occupation, early Christian groups can be understood “as activists...to maintain their traditional way of life against the incursions of Western imperial rule” (Horsely 17). Christianity, in its infancy, was an institution for colonized peoples that asserted pride and identity. The communal mentalities of these early sects encouraged a proliferation of local tradition and rejected the cultural erasure threatened by Roman rule. Calling on the ancient roots of Christianity emphasizes Kingsolver’s assertion that religion is a constantly evolving organism. If Christianity possesses the potential to change so much that it allies with the imperial intentions it initially rejected, as a religion, it also possesses the potential to once again act as a force that validates identities of colonized peoples

and galvanizes cultural preservation. For the hope of a progressive Christianity that moves beyond its historical collusion with imperialism, Kingsolver uses her novel to encourage Christianity to recapture its roots as an institution committed to ending rather than proliferating imperial injustices.

Reaching to the past as a motivation for the future of Christianity, Kingsolver proposes a new approach to religion and the formation of what John C. Hawley refers to as the 'Third Church.' In his essay "The Search for Language of Justice," Hawley highlights the necessity of a church with a global and multicultural approach to Christianity: "The make up of the church has changed, so has the consideration of its role" (Hawley 126). Hawley, like Kingsolver, understands that traditional approaches to religion no longer meet the needs of an increasingly large and multi-cultural Christian following. Using her writing as contribution to the Third Church's role as a mechanism of justice and awareness, Barbara Kingsolver demonstrates the interconnectedness of Biblical studies, postcolonial justice and literary fiction. According to Biblical and postcolonial scholar, Elizabeth Fiorenze, "A transformation of Biblical studies requires the articulation of a theoretical and practical framework for overcoming the division between scholars and church leaders, between 'expert' readers and the common reader, between scholarly interpretation and popular application," articulating the importance of communication and exchange between many different groups (Fiorenze 240). Indeed, Kingsolver's novel answers this need, representing postcolonial ideology in the language of household Christianity solidifying Biblical studies as a discipline relevant to contemporary fiction, readers and political climate. In doing so, Kingsolver establishes herself not only as a social activist but also as a writer deeply enmeshed in issues that dominate the postcolonial literary genre.

Kingsolver acts “on the side of peace, by drawing attention to the mistreatment of the people by imperialists... Barbara Kingsolver would prefer to see the people allowed to arrive at self-determination. This is what marks her intent, attitude, and work postcolonial” (Jussawalla 29). Not only does Kingsolver establish her intent to regain the voices of the disenfranchised in her use of Biblical scripture but by calling on Christian tradition, she also proposes that that colonized peoples should receive ‘Biblical’ justice. According to Ed Block, “Biblical justice takes two related forms... ‘distributive’ (and its related ‘retributive’) justice, and the more mysterious awesome justice of God” (Block 37). Block defines distributive justice as an Old Testament prophetic call to assist the poor, while ‘God’s justice’ implies that the reward for extreme righteousness is righteousness itself. To receive ‘God justice,’ in other words, is to receive a vision of “goodness, a vision of Yahweh” (Block 36). Hence, Biblical notions of justice encourage the proliferation of morality through spirituality. While Kingsolver’s novel tends to blend these two ideas of Biblical justice, *The Poisonwood Bible* is clearly interested in a system that not only provides for the destitute, but also challenges others to take up values of community service and aide. Ed Block elaborates on themes of Biblical justice in fiction: “Novels that emphasize biblical ideals of justice begin with respect for personhood but translate that predisposition into actions that serve to affirm the poor, to ameliorate the lot of the oppressed or to oppose the forces of injustice” (Block 37). Using Block’s guidelines for novels concerned with Biblical justice, it becomes evident that Kingsolver’s extreme attention to the disenfranchised Congolese people and criticism of government corruption pinpoints her novel as one of those Block describes. As such, Kingsolver’s epigraphs paired with her narrative linkages to Christianity become Kingsolver’s vehicle for postcolonial justice. Kingsolver allies herself with this powerful movement to regain a postcolonial voice in the religious language that long

dictated African subordination and that legitimized systems of Western sovereignty. In asking for 'Biblical justice' Kingsolver requests that Christianity become the great equalizer, demanding the same behavioral standards and assign the same punishments for Westerners and Africans alike.

As an intervention into postcolonial Biblical studies, the epigraphs of Kingsolver's novel play on the interpretive tensions between scriptural support for imperialism and readings that decolonize the Bible. Each quotation can be understood through Nathan Price's fundamentalism but each also carries thematic and narrative undertones that defy traditional readings. These new interpretive possibilities exemplify the Bible's ability to represent the themes and hopes of postcolonial justice. Facilitating a dialogue with Christianity, *The Poisonwood Bible* protests colonial oppression by appropriating a rhetorical tool of Western domination. Demonstrating the Bible's malleability and capacity for transportation into the Congolese situation, Kingsolver illustrates this text's ability to protest empire, help colonial and postcolonial peoples deal with their histories and to elicit empathy for oppressed groups everywhere.

Appropriately, the opening book of Kingsolver's novel bears the same title as the opening book of the canonical Christian Bible, Genesis. In Biblical narrative context, Genesis introduces the formation of the universe and creation of life. Before this moment in Christian ideology, before God said, 'Let there be light,' the world was a "void" covered in "darkness" (Gen 1:2). Metaphorically this theme extends to the Price's experience in the Congo. Their story begins when they leave the protective bubble of rural Georgia. Enlightenment comes to each Price woman as they each recognize, in varying degrees, their ignorance to the world outside America. Exposed first-hand to the political and religious subjugations in Africa, Adah, Orleana and Leah recognize missionary work as instrumental in the solidification of racist, ethnocentric attitudes

towards Africa. Fittingly, Kingsolver uses a passage for her epigraph that addresses these issues of dominion and authority:

“And God said unto them,  
 Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth,  
 And subdue it: and have dominion  
 Over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air,  
 And over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Gen. 1.28)

Here, God grants Adam authority over all the world’s flora and fauna. God commands Adam to ‘multiply’ so that more humans may help him ‘subdue’ the earth. Humans hold ‘dominion’ over the earth but also possess the responsibility to control it. Both of these words are strongly associated with power dynamics and with domination, themes clearly at play throughout Kingsolver’s novel in the entwined movements of Western political intervention and missionary work. Kingsolver’s use of this quotation is obviously satiric, challenging the legitimacy of Western power by mocking colonial entities’ presentation of their commercial initiatives as a religious ordination for expansion and conquest. Kingsolver’s characterization of Nathan in addition to her negative portrayal of the American government’s presence in the Congo conveys the sense that Westerners, Americans in particular, consider themselves a modern manifestation of Adam and are hence entitled to all his responsibilities. The duty of replenishing and subduing is not one that Westerners share with Africans, but rather the Africans function as objects to be subdued. Kingsolver here questions who dominates and who must submit, pushing against established conventional Western approach to this passage, attributing Adam’s responsibilities to Europeans. Through the comparison between Adam and America, Kingsolver points to the lunacy in the idea that one entity posses the authority to control the entire world. Adam’s

mandate comes from God and his authority to enact any kind of rulership over the earth stems from a divine appointment. Kingsolver suggests that neither America nor Europe holds any such appointment. Rather, instead of a God-given position, the West grants itself permission to not only to become the dominator but also grants itself the decisive power to pick and choose that which must be conquered. The analogy therefore suggests that in positioning itself as Adam, Western nations eliminate God's permission and instruction, thereby overthrowing the very foundations of Christianity.

Although Kingsolver's Genesis epigraph carries the weight of an extreme condemnation of the American God complex, it also, more subtly carries themes of cultural assertion. When the authors of Genesis initially wrote down the stories that had, until that time, only existed as a part of a much larger oral tradition, the writing was motivated by a desire to reaffirm Jewish culture and rebel against Babylonian oppressors. At the time of Genesis' writing, 2000-1500 B.C.E., the Jewish people lived as slaves under the rule of the Babylonians (Mays *New Oxford Annotated Bible* 1). Far from their homeland, alienated from family and from their cultural traditions, the affirmation through religious writing established the validity and superiority of Jewish beliefs over those of the Babylonian cult. The political implications of Genesis carry protests against forced alienation, themes which also appear in *The Poisonwood Bible*. On a basic level, *The Poisonwood Bible* itself acts as a form of protest, professing the importance of Congolese cultures and societal structures the same way that Genesis defends the Hebrews. The Genesis epigraph directly compares the Congolese people and the Hebrews, through a shared history of slavery and oppression by foreign powers. The Congolese, unlike the Hebrews in the fact that they stay in their original homeland, experience the same feelings of estrangement and longing for a homeland unmarred by invasive ideals of 'civilization.' In a more complex comparison, the

implicit feelings of isolation, and loneliness expressed by the writers of Genesis also appear in the narrations of the Price women. Like the Hebrews, they feel alienated from their physical homeland, alienated from the Congolese people and alienated from many of the major ideological underpinnings that dictate their presence in the Congo. The themes of separation in Genesis provide the Price women with a way of understanding Congolese suffering in terms of their own distance from a familiar environment, demonstrating a Christian story's capacity to help both colonial and non-colonial peoples understand the pain of an imperial history.

Interestingly, Kingsolver orders her sections such that the last book of the canonical Christian Bible directly follows the very first book. Revelation contains predictions for the end of times hence its placement in *The Poisonwood Bible*, directly after the moment of creation references the historically painful relationship between Europe and Africa. The Congo, in terms of Western consciousness, was born when it the first Europeans began reporting on the territory's boundless natural resources. This discovery and 'creation' of the Congo in Western thought signaled the beginning of the end of Congolese independence and freedom from European control. However, here again, Kingsolver plays on Biblical themes to challenge the legitimacy of European and American power over the Congo. Similar to Genesis' refutation of the Babylonian empire's authority, Revelation rejects the Roman Empire:

And I stood upon the same of the sea

And saw a beast rise up...

If any man have an ear, let him hear. (Rev. 13.1, 13.9)

The 'beast' described in this passage symbolizes the Roman Empire (*New Oxford Annotated Bible* 1504). In the story, the beast has "ten horns and seven, heads, with ten diadems upon its horns...." (Rev. 13.1), drawing attention to the beast's wealth while also highlighting its

horrifying appearance. Revelation records the beast as speaking with a “haughty and blasphemous words” (Rev. 13.5) condemning the attitudes and values of the Roman Empire. According to Revelation, the presence of the Roman Empire is an affront to God and calls for every man to ‘hear’ this word and recognize the ungodly institution. Here, Kingsolver uses an epigraph that expands on same themes underlying the Genesis epigraph. This quotation is a direct and undeniable condemnation of empire; one that calls for refutation and resistance to imperialism. Already establishing the ways the Congolese may relate to the plight of oppressed Biblical peoples, Kingsolver here provides an example of Biblical ideological rebellion against the ruling powers, demonstrating an instance where colonial peoples might draw strength, fortitude and inspiration for understanding and confronting their history.

Perhaps the most solid example of Kingsolver’s criticism of uncompromising Christianity, the epigraph of the chapter entitled ‘The Judges’ speaks directly to the kind of inflexibility and harshness inherent to Nathan’s brand of religion. The quotation used comes from a section of the Bible in which God describes the Israelites responsibilities when interacting with foreign nations:

And yet shall make no league with the  
inhabitants of this land;  
Ye shall throw down their altars...  
They shall be as thorns in your sides,  
and their gods shall be a snare unto you. (Judg. 2.2-3)

While other Biblical books take a more moderate approach on contact between aliens and the tribe, Judges advocates for absolutely no tolerance of any individual outside God’s ‘chosen people.’ This interpretation unmistakable parallels the underlying racism of Nathan Price’s

mission. Rather than treating the Congolese people as equals to share in the divine truth, Nathan immediately views their lifestyle as barbaric and crude without ever truly understanding. Nathan knocks down the “alters” of Congolese culture by insisting in their inherent ignorance and inferiority. Kingsolver condemns Nathan for this practice showing that there is more at stake in the use of this quotation. By presenting an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ scenario, Kingsolver considers: Who are amongst the ‘chosen people?’ Born in the Middle East, Christianity clearly possesses no more ethnic or geographic relevance to European descendents than it does for African peoples. Because of her vested interest in fostering a sense of global Christianity, Kingsolver’s intentions invert the fundamental reading of this quotation: For Kingsolver, the ‘chosen people’ are those people that embrace the spirit of community and unity through shared initiatives to help the needy and relieve the oppressed. Nathan and those like him are the actual ‘enemies of God,’ not the Congolese. In the context of Kingsolver’s politically charged novel, the Biblical instruction to ‘throw down their alters’ becomes an instruction to reject the idols commercialism and consumerism, which motivate Western abuse in Africa.

Book Four in *The Poisonwood Bible* demonstrates Kingsolver’s progressively more overt use of Biblical quotations to aggressively condemn Western intervention and confidently assert Congolese authority. Not part of the Canonical Christian Bible, Bel and the Serpent is an apocryphal text, expanding on the Old Testament book of Daniel. In this story, the prophet Daniel protests as the townspeople offer sacrifices to the idol of a serpent. Believing that the idol comes alive at night and consumes everything they leave, the people continue to give offerings encouraged by the local priests. Daniel condemns their behavior flatly stating that there is only one true God and that the serpent is nothing more than a false idol. Angry, the priests reply to Daniel:

Do you not think that Bel is a living God?

Do you not see how much he eats and  
drinks every day? (Bel and Serp. 1.6)

Knowing that the priests promote the idol as a means of procuring the offerings for themselves, Daniel sets a trap and catches them in the act of stealing thereby proving that the serpent is neither real nor living. This story explicitly speaks to the exploitation of an entire town for the gain of only a few. The hero, however, triumphs over the insatiable, and animalistic greed of the abusive priests. The epigraph acts as an extended parallel to the Congo's relationship to Europe. Like the greedy priests, colonial officials and later American businessmen swindled, tricked and stole the wealth of Congolese natural resources. Through these commonalities, Kingsolver presents not only the way the Congolese may use this story to relate and articulate their colonial past but the story also carries hope for victims. Daniel, refusing to back down, eventually liberates the people from their mistaken ideas and publically charges the priests with deception and thievery. This epigraph expresses Kingsolver's hope for a public recognition and reparation for the wrongs committed to sate Western avarice.

The Exodus epigraph also tells a liberation story. Through Moses, one of the most prominent figures of the Old Testament, the Jewish people receive the divine support to finally escape generations of bondage. God protects and leads them out of Egypt to a promised land:

...And ye shall carry up my bones

away hence with you.

And they took their journey... and encamped...

in the edge of the wilderness...

He took not away the pillar of cloud by day

nor the pillar of fire by night. (Exod. 13.19-22)

The first lines of this passage, “And ye shall carry up my bones...” refer to another important Old Testament figure, Joseph. A Jewish man, first condemned to servitude in Egypt, later rising to a position as the Pharaoh’s chief advisor, Joseph remained, throughout his life, a person of two worlds. With God’s help he successfully navigated Egyptian custom, largely integrating with Egyptian tradition, even taking an Egyptian wife. Because of his prominent position, Joseph remained in Egypt until his death. Buried in the manner of the Egyptians, Joseph’s bones remained in there for centuries without proper Jewish respect or religious ritual. Only when later generations leave Egypt as liberated slaves, do Joseph’s bones return to the land of his father, finally and respectfully laid to rest. This story not only conveys a sense of ultimate alienation from homeland and traditions, Joseph’s tale also denies, for centuries, the satisfaction of a complete narrative arc. The profound sense of sadness at Joseph’s inability even in the afterlife, to return home mimics the deeply sorrowful plight of colonial peoples as represented through Leah Price’s narrations. Unable to return to the land of their forefathers, a land untouched by European civilization or custom, Leah mourns the loss of a home familiar to the Congolese. Kingsolver uses this quotation to elicit sympathy for a dream and a longing destroyed by coloniality.

Also important to note in the Exodus story is God’s constant presence with the Jewish people. The pillars of smoke and fire symbolize God, physically leading his people away from Egypt and to the Promised Land. God sides with the subdued people granting Moses the power to mystically blackmail the Egyptian Pharaoh into releasing the slaves. Again, Kingsolver’s intent is unmistakable. She utterly rejects the Christian God as one that endorses oppression.

The final chapter title in *The Poisonwood Bible* that refers Biblical scripture, Song of the Three Children, like Bel and the Serpent, takes its name from an Apocryphal addition to Daniel. In this story, the king throws three young men: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, into a fire for refusing to bow down to his false idols. The text Kingsolver uses in her epigraph is the hymn, the three men sing as they walk into the conflagration:

All that you have brought upon us

And all that you have done to us,

You have done in justice...

Deliver us in your wonderful way. (Song 3 Childr. 7-19)

Pleading for God to deliver them from the harm of the flames the men also for freedom from a king who persecutes their religious beliefs. Because the men truly believe in God and refuse to accept anyone other than the one true God, they emerge from the flames unscathed, convincing the King of his own foolishness. Yet another instance of Kingsolver's use of persecution to connect back to the Congo's story, here, the main characters endure through faith and belief. Miraculously, as *The Poisonwood Bible*'s narrative suggests, Congolese culture, despite life-threatening incursions of Western tradition and insistence of the abolition of African identity, continues to exist. While obviously carrying the scars of subjugation and subordination, Kilangan culture continues to flourish. Anatole continues to express hope for a better Congo. The names of the dead live on in Leah's sons. Nostalgically, Kingsolver's final use of Biblical scripture honors the enduring power of the Congolese spirit, hoping that eventually, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the African people may 'convert' through inspiration, finally receiving the recognition they deserve as an intensely strong people.

Contesting traditional views of Christianity, Kingsolver uses the epigraphs in her novel to present the Christian Bible as a lens through which colonial and non-colonial peoples may understand and recognize the ramifications of empire. Providing instances in the Bible that reject oppression, empathize with alienation, and assert cultural legitimacy, Kingsolver appropriates a religious rhetoric associated with the gains of empire in order to establish the Bible's capacity to act as a force of decolonization and unification amongst its readers. Kingsolver uses *The Poisonwood Bible* to give concrete examples of ways that Christianity can increase worldwide awareness, interest and activism for the liberation of oppressed peoples. Extremely unique in the use of these Biblical quotations, Kingsolver teaches the kind of critical reading necessary to the progressive use of scripture as a vehicle for social justice and communal formation.

## Conclusion

Perhaps too Edenic in her interpretations of pre-colonial Africa and too naïve in her hopes for the creation of a worldwide community, Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, nevertheless boldly and admirably confronts the established myth of a religious binary. Christianity itself, as Kingsolver repeatedly demonstrates, has the capacity for both great good and great evil. Fully appreciating the inherent complexity of discussing religious issues, Kingsolver acknowledges the presence of multiple Christian initiatives within the Congo. Through the hateful Nathan Price, the kindly Brother Fowles, and the guilt-ridden Leah Price, Kingsolver presents a wide and various definition of what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be a missionary.

Depicting an political era where some missionaries like Nathan Price continue to foolishly believe in the importance and relevance of a nineteenth century imperial idea of a 'civilizing mission,' Kingsolver critically recognizes that other Christians understand the new times call for new approaches to religion that involve working for better conditions and social justice. Kingsolver harshly condemns the continued presence of complicity between politics and religion while she values the promotion of tolerance and understanding. Using the Bible as a template for her novel, Kingsolver concretely establishes the possibility for interpretive multiplicity, including readings of scripture that complement goals of decolonization. Her contribution to this religious development reveals Kingsolver's belief that Christianity, despite its dark history, has the potential to profoundly and positively effect on the trajectory of African countries like the Congo. When religion prioritizes human harmony rather than commercial gain or racial stratification, Kingsolver points out that true and lasting positive change can happen.

Proposing constructive ways for colonial and non-colonial people to approach an imperial past, Kingsolver looks forward to a future where Christianity unites people with a sense of commonality and empathy. Providing a space for future writers and academics to also confront the complex political and social issues associated with Christianity and coloniality, Kingsolver pioneers the use of popular fiction as a tool for questioning the sacredness of American and European institutions. Not merely interested in establishing a scholarly tradition, however, Kingsolver leaves each of her readers with a task as they finish her profound novel. Without thought to education, age, social status, or creed, Barbara Kingsolver directs every person to reenter the world ready to become, even in immeasurable and imperceptible ways, a more active, more aware, and more altruistic participant in their global neighborhood.

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