

Genuine Faith is Never Overcome
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The Bible is filled with stories of people who risked or even lost their lives for the sake of their religious convictions. For some critiques of religion (especially Christianity), these are just stories that have nothing to do with reality. However, it is hard to deny the existence of people like Benjamin Franklin whose family remained Protestant even during the reign of Queen Mary 1 of England. The willingness of people like Franklin's ancestors to risk their lives, and the willingness of hundreds of others to endure the agony of being burned to death shows that people who place their faith above all else will not give it up for anything, not even their lives.

The Benjamin Franklin family stool is a wooden Tudor-style stool that is about 9"by 13"by 20", and has an old dog-eared Bible taped to it. This facsimile was created to illustrate the fact that because ownership of an English Bible was outlawed, Franklin's great-great-grandfather got a Bible, taped it under a stool and read it to his family aloud while somebody watched out for officers of the spiritual court. If an officer of the court was coming, Franklin's ancestors would simply turn the stool back to normal until he had passed, as Benjamin Franklin stated in his *Autobiography*.

For the purpose of this paper, there are two forms of religious oppression: suppression of a religious faith and suppression of religious conscience. Suppression of religious faith refers to the systematic persecution of the adherents of a religion by secular authorities or majority of the citizens. Suppression of religious conscience refers to an internal conflict within a religion where some adherents of that religion are persecuted by the majority for not conforming to majority opinion. What both have in common is the fact that those whose faith is genuine do not give in to either form of oppression. The latter was the case during the era of the Protestant Reformation

and Mary 1. The Catholic Church considered itself the one true Church of Christ and did its very best to protect its flock from influences deemed heretical. One of the ways it did this was by prohibiting the translation of the Bible into English and also by prohibiting private ownership of the Bible. There were some who believed that people should be able to read or hear the Bible in a way that they could understand. People like John Wycliffe translated the Bible for the ordinary people, but the Catholic Church and secular authorities did not agree with that principle. Both the translators and those who used the translations were persecuted. On May 4, 1415 the Council of Constance “(forbade Catholics) henceforth, under pain of anathema, to preach, teach or affirm in public (Wycliffe’s) articles, or to teach, approve or hold the said books, or to refer to them in any way, unless this is done, as has been said, for the purpose of refuting them.”¹

The above was not the first time that religious minorities had been persecuted. The Roman Empire systematically persecuted anyone whose religious beliefs were deemed offensive. According to Dr. Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe, Christians were targeted because their beliefs were misunderstood (e.g. The Body of Christ = cannibalism?), they refused to worship the gods, and they refused to sacrifice to the Roman Emperor. The Christian beliefs were misunderstood because they were practiced in secrecy. However, their open refusal to worship the gods was deemed dangerous to society since the society was presumably under the protection of the gods. The Roman Emperor was considered to be a god, therefore refusing to worship him was both treasonable and somewhat blasphemous.²

For the above reasons, Christians of the first few centuries AD were persecuted by Rome. At first the persecution was not as severe as the persecution under Diocletian. A letter between

¹ Council of Constance 1414-18. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Councils/ecum16.htm>

² Lunn-Rockliffe, S. (2011, 02 17). *Christianity and the Roman Empire*. Retrieved from http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/christianityromanempire_article_01.shtml

Pliny the Younger (a Roman governor) showed that Christians were not sought out but were rather arrested and given a 'fair' trial. Anyone accused of being a Christian was asked to curse Christ, make offerings to the emperor and invoke the gods "none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do" according to Pliny.³ Emperor Trajan (98-117 AD) ordered him not to engage in any form of witch-hunt. Only those who admitted to being Christians were to be punished. The Christians of this era, though not being sought out, had to practice their religion in secret for the fear of being tried. Those who were eventually found gave up their lives rather than curse their Lord or serve other gods. Even this relative security was eventually lost when Diocletian initiated the worst persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire between 303 and 311 AD. It is estimated that about three thousand or more people were killed in the persecution.

Even today, people of strong religious conviction face oppositions: sometimes mild and sometimes very strong. An example of a mild opposition is the fact that mocking religious faith is now part of 'humor' in the entertainment industry. But there are some places where Christians face a far more serious form of religious oppression. An example of that would be Nigeria. Nigeria is a country that is almost evenly divided between Muslims and Christians with the North being predominantly Muslim and the rest of the country predominantly Christian. Because of this divide, those who are Christian in Northern states sometimes lose their lives to Islamic extremists as was what happened on in August 2012 when a bombing attack left nineteen people dead.⁴ Attacks like these have killed Thousands in Nigeria.

³ Halsall, P. (1996, 03). *Medieval Sourcebook*: Pliny on the Christians. Retrieved from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/pliny1.asp>.

⁴ "Nigeria church attack in Kogi state 'kills 19'". (2012, 08 07). Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19161082>

According to a research conducted by Pew Research Center, religious intolerance has been on the rise at least as of 2010. According to this research, Christians were harassed in 111 countries in 2010 [up from 107, 95, 97 in 2001, 2008, 2009 respectively].⁵ Between mid-2006 and mid-2010, Christians had been harassed in 139 countries, Muslims in 121 and Jews in 85. In all the data that showed hostility toward religions, Christianity was always the first and Islam the second. This research shows that the 16th century Protestants weren't the only ones who had to risk their lives for the sake of their religion, people still do so today.

From the very first days of Christianity, Christians have endured persecution for refusing to conform to prevailing norms and customs. This persecution did not stop them from carrying on their practices and spreading their message even though some of them died to do so. To some people, the idea of a single religion rising from being a small persecuted cult to being the foundation of Western civilization is unimpressive because it has happened before, or because there were factors that caused it to happen. But considering the fact that people suffered severe persecution (the beast cages, burning at stake etc.) to keep the message of salvation alive, it is hard to attribute the triumph of Christianity to a mere natural progression of events. Christianity didn't become a major religion simply because it 'could' happen; rather it happened because those who place their faith above all else would not give it up for anything, not even their lives.

⁵ "Rising Tide of Restrictions on Religion." (2012, 09 20). Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/Government/Rising-Tide-of-Restrictions-on-Religion-findings.aspx>

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