The Darfur Crisis: A Spiritual Analysis
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The genocide occurring in Sudan is a human rights atrocity that leaves many citizens displaced, diseased, or even dead. The 5 million Sudanese who have been relocated during the past 23 years (Reed n.p.), often turn to spirituality to help them cope with the ubiquitous hopelessness and death. In Ryan Spencer Reed’s exhibit Sudan: The Cost of Silence, many of the refugees use religion to combat their despondency and to search for salvation. Although the photograph “Kotobi, South Sudan” with the caption reading, “Local women collectively mourn the death of a thirteen-year-old girl who passed away from sleeping sickness” (Reed n.p.), does not outwardly portray a religious scene, many other photographs, such as the series involving the “Village near Lui, South Sudan” possess overt spiritual images. The Bible, church, and cross, prominent symbols of Christianity, are the only religious images used in the exhibit. The lack of other religious icons suggests that Christianity is the most prominent religion among Sudanese refugees. The photographs of the cross, church, and Bible show that even amongst the death and destruction, many Sudanese have not lost their faith in God. In contrast to the religious scenes, the pictures of death and violence in Reed’s exhibit show that faith alone does not grant refugees salvation from corporal suffering. Despite the promise of religion, the photograph, “Kotobi, South Sudan,” shows the despair which perpetually combats the hope of spiritual salvation.

With so much death and destruction, many Sudanese use the Bible as a means of support, comfort, and hope for their weary, war-torn lives. Although not featured in “Kotobi, South Sudan,” the Bible is the focal point in the photograph, “Village near Lui, South Sudan,” indicating the text’s significance in Sudanese daily life. Since many are
suffering with minimal foreign aid to alleviate the prevalent ailments (Peterson 232-233), the people of Sudan turn to God as a guide and source of hope. However, as shown by the despondency and frustration of the women in “Kotobi, South Sudan,” faith in God and prayer does not appear to be lessening the severity of their situation. The photograph of the Bible is surrounded by pictures of sadness and death, indicating that the Holy Scriptures alone do not have the power to stop the suffering. Despite the apparent futility of prayer, many Sudanese continue to read the Bible as a guide to lead them towards salvation from suffering. While the Bible contains many passages of hope and promise, several verses contain stories and prophesies of devastation and death.

For Sudanese Christians, the death of the girl in the photograph “Kotobi, South Sudan” is symbolic of Biblical destruction and the prophesied apocalypse. The placard alongside the photograph reads that the deceased “passed away from sleeping sickness,” a curable ailment (Reed n.p.). Since an increased number of Tsetse flies, the carriers of sleeping sickness (Barrett, n.p.), emerge during times of excess rain, the girl may have become infected during the rainy season. If the girl had become ill during the rainy season, she would not have been able to reach a hospital or clinic since many of the roads would have been flooded (Chapin-Metz 118). To the Sudanese Christians, the girls’ untimely death during the rainy season is symbolic of the destruction of life featured in Genesis. In the Bible God said to Noah, “And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh... and every thing that is in the earth shall die” (Genesis 6:17). In Genesis, God not only creates life in the first passages, but also demonstrates Its destructive powers by destroying Its creation. During the Biblical
flood, God showed no compassion for humans or animals, much like Its lack of compassion for the dying girl in “Kotobi, South Sudan.”

In addition to the destruction of creation in Genesis, the prophesied Apocalypse in the Book of Revelation seems to manifest with not only the girl’s death, but also with the Sudanese suffering throughout the country. During the past twenty-three years of war, Sudan has endured famine, pestilence, and death, symbolized by the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Revelation 6:1-17). The war and violence led to the destruction of medical centers, continuing the pestilence, which includes the sleeping sickness that claimed the young girl’s life. Throughout the country, famine persists, as the aid and supplies from the United Nations (UN) is sparse and thus, ineffective for much of the country (Peterson 232-233). The impotence of the UN’s crisis relief funding perpetuates the Sudanese deaths caused by preventable malnutrition or curable diseases. As more people die, their life stories are lost and the world remains unaware of the magnitude of the crisis in Darfur.

Although not fully photographed, the deceased provides insight into the silence of the Sudanese stories. The girl is covered in a white sheet with white gauze wrapping her head and covering her mouth (see figure 1). The gauze covering the mouth seems to not only symbolize the silence of the girl’s story, but also, is universally symbolic of all the other Sudanese who silently suffer from curable diseases, yet succumb to the ailment due to conflict-created substandard living conditions. The deceased, who suffered from a curable illness, shows that while God has the power to create life, It also possesses the ability to take away the same life It generates. For the Sudanese women in the
photograph, the girl’s death may not necessarily be a time of mourning, but, rather, relief that God has removed the girl from earthly suffering.

While the white gauze symbolizes silence, the white sheet represents the girl’s entrance into Heaven. The girl endured her own personal apocalypse of war, pestilence, and death and was eventually removed from her suffering by God. In the Book of Revelation, those who suffered on earth had their robes washed and “made white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14). White, at least in Western religion, is often associated with Heaven and peace. The white sheet envelops the girl, surrounding her in a blanket of eternity. She is safe, removed from earthly violence, suffering, and despair. Not only does the white sheet symbolize her entrance into Heaven, but also, the unusual camera angle creates a spiritual perspective into the photograph.

![Image](image.jpg)

Fig. 1: “Kotobi, South Sudan.” Photograph by Ryan Spencer Reed. Wilkes-Barre: Sordoni Art Gallery, 2007.

The positioning of the camera in the picture creates an angle which, in addition to creating a spiritual ambiance, creates a desire within the viewer to help the refugees
The view into the photograph is not a normal perspective from which a person perceives the world. When viewers observe the photograph, the angle creates a feeling of floating above the action on the ground. The angle forces the viewer to feel uncomfortably superior to the poor women in the photograph, as if the viewer himself/herself were God. The uncomfortable feeling of supremacy may motivate some viewers into using their “power” towards helping to alleviate the Darfur crisis.

The camera angle also creates the illusion that either God or the girl’s soul is peering down upon the sadness which the war has caused. If the angle does represent the girl’s view of her own body, then the photograph generates hope that an afterlife exists beyond corporal anguish. However, if the angle is indicative of God’s perspective of the Earth, then the viewer questions why God allows the pain and sorrow to continue. If God allows the perpetuation of suffering, then perhaps God is not the protective and loving entity portrayed in Christianity. However, despite the supposed lack of God’s protection, several other facets of the photograph symbolize the affection and compassion of God.

Although the position of the camera allows for only six women to be fully displayed in the photograph, the other partially visible women symbolize the hope that God’s love and protection reaches both the living and the dead. A woman at the bottom of the picture is only partially visible with her arms surrounding the deceased. The arms may symbolize that the child is now in God’s “hands,” protected from corporal suffering. The angle also permits the viewer to observe that the funeral is taking place outdoors on the dirt. Even though they are in bodily form, the women kneeling on the earth are connected to the dirt. The deceased will be buried in the dirt where her body will decay
and become unified with the soil. In the Bible, God conveyed to Adam, “for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19). The presence of the living and the dead amongst the dirt symbolizes that although human beings may suffer while living, hope exists in the afterlife when one is unified with God. In contrast to the spiritual aspects of the exhibit which symbolize either God’s love or destruction, the human facets of the photographs portray man’s emotional devastation.

While men are typically portrayed as aggressors throughout the entire exhibit, women are pictured in passive roles, such as taking care of children, collecting water, or nursing the dying. The absence of men in the photograph, “Kotobi, South Sudan,” shows that women endure much of the emotional suffering, with the loss of infants, children, and soldiers. Sudanese men may either be willingly absent from the photograph, choosing not to participate in the funeral, or they may be reluctantly absent, fighting incoming factions of enemies. The absence of men forces the viewer to recognize the inequality between the sexes. The inequality between men and women may arise from the Sudanese’s close affiliation with Christianity, a religion which prevents women from holding high ranking church positions. Since the story of Adam and Eve in the Bible (Genesis 2:21-24), women have been subservient to men in the Christian religion. Since Sudanese women are secluded to nurturing children and taking care of the sick (Kim n.p.), their emotional attachment with relatives and other females causes them to experience intense suffering when loved ones die. In addition to the emotional support provided by other women, the Bible often becomes a source of comfort for those mourning death.
The six women surrounding the girl provide an emotional focal point which generates guilt within the viewer. Five of the six women are looking away from the camera, toward the dirt. Their facial expressions convey sadness, disappointment, and frustration, as one woman, who looks toward the camera, shouts for help, but is ignored. The five women make no attempt to convey their thoughts or feelings to the audience; rather, they avert their eyes in a display of passiveness and despondency. The five women’s lack of an attempt to communicate represents how the Sudanese have had their hope, spirit, and ambition taken away by the ignorance of others who fail to help alleviate the crisis. Upon seeing the frustration and sadness of the women, viewers begin to feel guilty that they have not aided the suffering of the Sudanese in any way. In the Bible, guilt is often represented as the great spiritual motivator, inspiring sinners and non-aspirants toward a holy path. Perhaps, the viewer’s guilt will force him/her onto a “holy path” towards selflessly aiding his/her fellow humans as in the “Good Samaritan” story told by Jesus in Luke 10:25-37. In Luke, the Samaritan came to the aid of a beaten man, paying for the victim’s shelter and food, but asking nothing in return for the kind deed. Similarly, the viewers’ guilt may inspire them to provide money, food, or shelter to the suffering Sudanese, without a selfish desire for accolades. Since guilt alone may not motivate the viewer to aid the Darfur crisis, the Sudanese must continue their own spiritual path towards saving themselves.

While the six women are significant, the remaining women, who are not fully photographed, show the spiritual hope that God will eventually recompense the Sudanese for their suffering. Each of the women has a significant life experience filled
with sadness resulting from twenty-three years of bloodshed. For the women in the photograph, like many Sudanese, the Bible has been prominent in their lives, promising salvation for the faithful. Psalm 37 promises that all those who suffer, but are righteous and believe in the Lord, will one day “inherit the earth” (Psalm 37:11). Passages, such as Psalm 37, provide hope that corporal suffering is not eternal and God will reward those who remain faithful.

Despite the death, pain, and destruction found throughout the country, many of the Sudanese people still turn to religion with the hope that prayer will help alleviate the suffering. Although many passages, such as verses from the Book of Revelation and Genesis, validate the ubiquitous destruction in Darfur, the majority of the messages in the Bible convey the hope upon which many Sudanese rely for emotional survival. Since the human psyche alone is not capable of coping with traumatic events, many refugees utilize the Bible to find reasons for their anguish. Some verses from the Bible reassure the faithful that those who suffer will attain salvation and an eternal peace in Heaven and earth. Therefore, no matter how bleak the Sudanese situation becomes, the refugees will continue to believe in God, hoping that one day they will find a Heavenly reward for the suffering they experience on earth.
Works Cited


The Bible. King James Version.


