

# The influence of Faith-Based Organizations on American Anti-Trafficking Policy: Understanding the cause and consequence of the prioritization of sex trafficking within the broad category of trafficking crimes in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000

Nathnael Mengistie

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In his paper that investigates the role of faith based organizations in American anti-trafficking efforts, Nathnael Mengistie takes on the existing scholarly establishment through the use of an eloquent and compelling **motive**. By illustrating that the existing scholarly conversation, which focuses on whether faith-based organizations are effective in their work, overlooks the important fundamental question of why faith-based organizations are involved in anti-trafficking efforts to begin with, Nathnael produces a meaningful and needed reframing of the conversation surrounding the role of faith-based organizations in anti-trafficking efforts.*

## *Excerpt*

Although faith-based organizations are making a big impact on the anti-trafficking movement, some scholars are skeptical about their work and question whether or not religious anti-trafficking organizations are better equipped to lead the fight against this contemporary issue. One of these scholars is Sarabeth Harrelson, author of “Mavericks or Allies: The Role of Faith-Based Organizations in the Anti-Trafficking Movement.” The author acknowledges that religious groups have some benefits because they are “armed with a religious sensibility, often go above and beyond the call of duty and act in ways that inspire an unusual degree of trust among program beneficiaries.”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, religious groups sometimes exclude people who have opposing religious views, or they try to convert them. The attempt to convert trafficking victims raises an ethical dilemma, and yet some Christian volunteers have been recorded saying: “Now we are befriending them, giving them food aid, clothes and stuff. We need to make friends with them first rather than telling them the concept of salvation. Long term that's where we are heading towards, to save their souls.”<sup>2</sup> As a result, Harrelson claims that faith-based organizations cannot lead the fight against human trafficking until they prioritize

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<sup>1</sup> Sarabeth Harrelson, “Mavericks or Allies: The Role of Faith-Based Organizations in the Anti-Trafficking Movement,” *Second Annual Interdisciplinary Conference on Human Trafficking* (2010). URL: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/humtrafconf2/19/>

<sup>2</sup> Saroj Jayasinghe, “Faith-based NGOs and healthcare in poor countries: a preliminary exploration of ethical issues” *Journal of Medical Ethics* vol. 33,11 (2007): 623-6.

humanitarian work over proselytizing work. On the other hand, Eric Twombly, author of *“Religious Versus Secular Human Service Organizations: Implications for Public Policy,”* refutes Harrelson’s claim by providing the results of a national study on faith-based organizations conducted in 2002 by political scientists John C. Green and Amy L. Sherman.<sup>3</sup> The main finding was that “faith is not prominently emphasized in many faith-based agencies, but the responses do suggest that the leaders of these organizations consider faith important and often try to provide some religious or spiritual input if clients want it.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, the study shows that 38% of the groups surveyed stated that spiritual transformation is very important and 70% claimed that they have staff available if anyone wanted to learn more about faith and religion, but only 20% said that they regularly ask clients to participate in religious activities. For Twombly, faith-based nonprofits that focus more on proselytizing work are a minority and should not be a cause for concern. Instead, the spiritual nature of faith-based organizations is actually an asset because it allows them to persevere and not give up, which makes them more effective than their secular counterparts. In fact, it has been noted that “in a field that is often discouraging with little immediate change seen, spiritual motivation results in committed advocates who will continue to press forward even when faced with disappointing results.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, Twombly states that faith-based nonprofits are not very involved in proselytizing work, but the spiritual nature of their work is actually quite useful and unique, which is why they must play a more prominent role in the anti-trafficking movement.

Although both scholars make reasonable assumptions, I believe that the main issue here is not whether or not faith-based organizations are more involved in proselytizing work; instead we must investigate the fact that these groups often focus on sex trafficking at the expense of other forms of trafficking, which is detrimental to the anti-trafficking movement. If we look at Marion Carson’s book titled *“Setting the captives free: The Bible and Human Trafficking”* as a theoretical lens, we can understand why Christians are especially concerned about sex trafficking even though other forms of trafficking such as organ and labor trafficking still exist. The author provides a thorough analysis of Christian doctrine based on the scripture and argues that faith-based organizations believe that sexual abuse is inherently evil, which is why they are fighting to preserve the God-given gift of a sexual relationship within the context of a heterosexual marriage. Using Carson’s book as a theoretical lens we can see why faith-based organizations are involved

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 624.

<sup>4</sup> John Green and Amy L. Sherman, “Fruitful Collaborations: A Survey of Government-Funded Faith-Based Programs in 15 States,” Hudson Institute, Washington, DC, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 7.

in the anti-trafficking movement and why they frame this problem around the religious rhetoric of sexual morality. This helps us understand how and why the narrow focus on sex trafficking has led to the neglect of labor and organ trafficking victims as well as the alienation of sex workers and LGBTQ+ trafficking victims because they do not conform to the Christian definition of sexual morality. Thus, instead of judging the effectiveness of faith-based organizations based on whether or not they focus on proselytizing work or discriminate members of other religious groups, we should look at legislation like the TVPA and more specifically the Anti-Prostitution Loyalty Oath amendment, statistics about the number of T-visas issued and the number of homeless LGBTQ+ trafficking survivors to understand that religious groups use their political and social influence to promote a heteronormative portrayal of trafficking victims that mostly focuses on sex trafficking because of the religious rhetoric that affirms that sexual immorality is the worst kind of sin. Consequently, this has led to the suffering of labor and organ trafficking victims as well as LGBTQ+ trafficking victims and sex workers. Yet, by examining the work being done by organizations such as Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Human Trafficking in Los Angeles and other newly developed victim identification methods, we can try to create a more inclusive and sustainable solution for the human trafficking crisis.

## *Author Commentary*

Nathnael Mengistie

“Why is there so much focus on sex trafficking?” I asked myself this question throughout my time in my freshman year Writing Seminar that explored Contemporary Slavery and its impact on communities across the globe. Before taking this class, I, like most people, used to picture young girls being forced to engage in sex work when thinking about human trafficking. Movies like Liam Neeson’s *Taken* denounce sex trafficking, whilst completely neglecting other forms of trafficking like labor and organ trafficking. Unfortunately, this focus on sex trafficking is not limited to the media. Domestic policies, international laws, and anti-trafficking organizations often allocate more funds and resources to fight sex trafficking whilst ignoring other forms of human trafficking. This is especially interesting when one considers the fact that, according to the International Labor Organization, out of the 21 million trafficking victims worldwide only 4.5 million are victims of “forced sexual exploitation.” Thus, in my final research paper, I wanted to understand the reasons behind these conflicting facts.

As stated above, my personal motive was to understand why human trafficking has mostly been associated with sexual exploitation when in reality there are many victims of forced labor working in the agricultural, construction, and textile industries. So my next step in the research process was to find a scholarly motive by pointing out an inconsistency in the scholarly literature. This was probably the most challenging part of the research process because I had to narrow down my focus and choose a few scholarly works to analyze. Nevertheless, with the help of my professor, I was able to find a primary source, two secondary sources, and a theoretical lens to intervene in the scholarly conversation.

I began my paper with an analysis of my primary source, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), which is the most important piece of anti-trafficking legislation in the U.S. I then introduced two scholars, Sarabeth Harrelson and Eric Twombly, who both explain the influence of faith-based organizations and lobbying groups on the drafting of the TVPA and their growing role in the anti-trafficking movement. Nevertheless, these scholars disagree on whether or not religious anti-trafficking organizations are better equipped to lead the fight against this contemporary issue because they “sometimes prioritize proselytizing work over humanitarian aid.” I, however, intervened in this scholarly conversation by stating that the main issue here is not whether or not faith-based organizations are more involved in proselytizing work, instead we must investigate the fact that these groups often focus on sex trafficking at the

expense of other forms of trafficking, which is detrimental to the anti-trafficking movement. I think that the strongest aspect of this paper is that I framed my initial question within a specific context: faith-based organizations. This, in turn, allowed me to establish my personal and scholarly motives and lay the foundation of my paper, which helped me make a successful intervention in the scholarly conversation.

## *Editor Commentary*

Nicholas Johnson

Motive is perhaps the most important writing lexicon concept that most Princetonians have not heard of or studied prior to beginning Writing Seminar. Defined by Gordon Harvey as the “intellectual context” that’s established at the beginning of a paper to suggest why the thesis is original or worthwhile, a motive should be present in every piece of academic writing and in many if not most other forms of writing. Nathnael’s paper is an excellent example of an effective scholarly motive. Scholarly motive is a specific type of motive that contextualizes the paper’s thesis in the context of the existing scholarly conversation surrounding the topic. Scholarly motive is critical to meaningful academic work as it explicitly establishes how an author’s work builds on and contributes to the existing body of knowledge. A common motivating move that is taught in Writing Seminars is what Mark Gaipa refers to as “taking on the establishment.” This particular motivating move is characterized by demonstrating how the existing scholarly conversation about a topic is flawed and introducing a novel, more appropriate framing of the conversation. This move is difficult to make successfully, particularly because individuals can abuse it to seemingly justify any argument in cases when they have not appropriately engaged with the existing scholarly conversation. Nathnael’s paper elegantly avoids this pitfall by clearly presenting the existing scholarly conversation and thereafter rationalizing the need for a reframing, thus demonstrating an ideal execution of this motivating move.

The first excerpted paragraph is devoted to establishing the primary arguments presented by past scholars surrounding the role that religious organizations play in anti- human trafficking efforts. In particular, Nathnael identifies that past scholars have focused on the notion of whether religious groups are appropriately positioned to exert a positive influence in these efforts given their spiritual leanings and potential desire to convert individuals whom they serve. The depth at which this paragraph explores this dynamic is important and exemplary – after reading this first paragraph the reader has a strong understanding of the existing conversation and likely anticipates that Nathnael will enter it on either side of the debate! By devoting appropriate time and space in his paper to specifying the state of the current debate, Nathnael expertly avoids a common pitfall of this motivating move: failing to address the work of past scholars and jumping too rapidly to the proposed reframing of the discussion. Thereafter, in the second excerpted paragraph, Nathnael sets the stage for a reframing of the scholarly conversation by suggesting that focusing on whether religious groups are effective in anti-trafficking efforts avoids exploring the more fundamental question of why such groups are involved in anti-trafficking efforts in the

first place. Nathnael then asserts that considering this more fundamental question, which is very much a natural question to ask before the question the existing scholarly discussion surrounds, reveals important insights into his topic. Moreover, he supports this assertion by alluding to the evidence he will draw on later in his paper. This last point is particularly effective because an author who executes this motivating move in some sense must meet a higher threshold when presenting arguments due to an inability to draw on most past scholarly work. Alluding to this evidence at this stage in the paper draws added credibility to the position being advanced. In so doing, Nathnael successfully takes on the establishment, motivating his paper to be a meaningful and needed reframing of the scholarly conversation surrounding the role of faith-based organizations in anti-trafficking efforts.

*Professor Commentary*

Professor Dannelle Gutarra Cordero, African American Studies & Gender and Sexuality Studies

During the course of the Writing Seminar "Contemporary Slavery," Nathnael Mengistie demonstrated a strong commitment to extending ongoing scholarship about exploitation through an inclusive global health lens. This commitment led Nathnael to design a compelling research project based on meticulous close reading of a rich collection of archival governmental reports and legislation. Nathnael's research paper evidences the impact of religious morality in the conceptualization of anti-trafficking public policy, alienating survivors. While the scholarly debate on faith-based anti-trafficking organizations in the United States is concentrated on the religious objectives of these nongovernmental organizations, Nathnael's argument shifts the focus towards those who are most marginalized: survivors. With the help of a theoretical lens on religious morality, the survivor-centered approach of this research paper poignantly denounces the exclusion of survivors due to religious discourses about sexuality, emphasizing the disregard towards sex workers and LGBT+ survivors. Nathnael's argument provides insight into the influence of Christian lobbying groups in anti-trafficking public policy in the United States, which has been obfuscated with sex trafficking and has thus silenced labor and organ trafficking survivors. Nathnael's research contributes to the academic conversation on contemporary slavery with its innovative analysis of barriers to inclusive survivor support.



## Works Cited

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**Bios**

**Nathnael Mengistie '22** is a sophomore studying in the Woodrow Wilson School of International Affairs and Public Policy and pursuing certificates in Global Health and Health Policy. Nathnael is interested in healthcare policy, medicine, and economic development and has participated in various research projects in these fields. He wrote this essay as a first-year.

**Nicholas Johnson '20** is in the Operations Research and Financial Engineering Department, focusing on issues of privacy and fairness in machine learning. He is pursuing minors in Applications of Computing, Applied and Computational Mathematics, and Statistics and Machine Learning. His hometown is Montréal, Québec. Nicholas is a Residential College Advisor in Whitman and works as a Fellow in the University's Writing Center. During his free time, he loves to play basketball, work out, and play chess. He wrote this as a senior.