An Interdisciplinary Approach to Teaching the Holocaust: 
Rhetoric, Religion, and Psychology
by
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Introduction
We humans call ourselves *Homo sapiens*, *man the wise*, a fantasy that it is our store of knowledge, and ultimately our wisdom that drive our decisions and behavior. Less arrogantly, *Homo religiosus* is perhaps a more accurate label. The interdisciplinary course on the Holocaust at the College of Notre Dame in Belmont, CA, begins with the universal religious motive that drives us all as presented in *Leviticus*. This religious motive is a hybrid of twin needs: the need for humans to assuage feelings of guilt or “sin” and the need to feel connected to a transcendent deity larger than the human self. Guilt arises from *sin* as defined by a particular religion or cultural group. Traditional religions use the process of *scapegoating* to expiate sin and thus enable fallible humans to feel worthy of standing before G-d.

The rhetorical scholar Kenneth Burke applied the *scapegoat* model to Hitler’s bible, *Mein Kampf*, and thus exposed Hitler’s demagoguery in a prophetic essay written in the early 1930s. Among other dubious accomplishments, *Mein Kampf* is a treatise on propaganda and how to manipulate the masses so that they will embrace and carry out Nazi ideology. Hitler explained exactly how he intended to use his propaganda to heal the sick German Volk and the process demanded that the Jews be used as the scapegoat.

For the *scapegoating* mechanism to work as a healing medicine for a sick body politic, the psychological categories of identification and projection must be operant. Hitler and his propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels were able to manipulate the human religious drive by utilizing the persuasive resources of language to generate propaganda that would appeal to the German Volk and thus transform a diabolical ideology into action. As speakers and as writers, Hitler and Goebbels were artists who understood the secret vibrations of the soul of the German people.

In framing the Holocaust with a religious motive, students first learn about *scapegoating* as depicted in *Leviticus*. Secondly, they read *Mein Kampf* to see how Hitler consciously employed the scapegoat model in his rhetoric. Thirdly, the psychological process of identification and the defense mechanism of projection are required for the scapegoat process to be effective. Students, armed with a functional understanding of how these psychological processes operate, are then equipped to analyze Nazi ideology and propaganda and ultimately understand how Hitler’s demonic vision became a reality. This interdisciplinary approach explains how, given the politics of a small, Catholic
liberal arts college, students can earn credit in religious studies, psychology, or communication.

**The Religious Motive**

Then Moses said to Aaron: “come forward to the altar and sacrifice your sin offering and your burnt offering, making expiation for yourself and for the people, and sacrifice the people’s offering and make expiation for them, as the L-rd has commanded.”

Aaron came forward to the altar and slaughtered his calf of sin offering.  
*(Leviticus, 36: 7-8)*

Sacrifice in the Hebrew bible preceded prayer as the means by which humans connected to G-d. In spite of the inevitable trespass, through the religious ritual of sacrifice, humans were able to feel purged of sin and pure enough to stand before their Creator. It is the underlying contention of this paper that the process of guilt purgation constitutes the fundamental religious motive in all humans. The cycle of guilt/sin—sacrifice—redemption is a drama that occurs within the individual psyche of a human, or, often tragically, the drama can be played out on the sociological level with whole societies acting out a collective religious need.

In *Leviticus*, the ritually pure high priest sacrifices the perfect vessel (calf, goat, birds, etc.) so that the individual or people can atone for their guilt. The priest casts the collective sins of the people onto the ritually pure goat. Psychology teaches that individuals project their inner tensions and conflicts onto external vessels to assuage their psychic tensions. Demagogues exploit the resources of language to manipulate vulnerable masses of people to accomplish their goals with rhetoric that exploits the human symbolic need for guilt purgation.

Thus, the religious motive can be described from three different aspects of human behavior: the religious, the psychological, and the rhetorical. Psychologists call it *projecting* while religions use the word *scapegoat*. Both terms, projection and scapegoat rely on the human capacity to identify like with perceived like. As will be established below, it is a resource of language that permits identification and subsequent rhetorical manipulations of it.

**Kenneth Burke on Mein Kampf**

Burke’s article is an academic expansion of a book review of *Mein Kampf* that was first published in the early 1930s. Burke felt that the anti-Hitler battle is to clarify how Hitler was appealing to the German masses in order that politicians of his kind in America [are] unable to perform a similar swindle. Burke delineated the rhetorical processes used by Hitler to enact the scapegoat model described in *Leviticus*. Hitler,
According to Burke, is the high priest whose medicine purges the guilty German Volk of their sins. Hitler is able to do so by using his rhetorical techniques or techniques of propaganda. These were techniques of simplification (all Germany’s problems are caused by the universal devil, the Jew); substitution of a non-economic solution for a complex economic problems (make Germany Judenrein) and unification of the German people by positioning Aryan superiority vs. all other untermenschen with a corresponding rebirth of the German Volk.

A history lesson describing the state of Germany after World War I must be included in the discussion. Unlike today’s students, Burke’s readers in the early 30s would not need to be reminded of the effects of the Treaty of Versailles or German: the guilt for having caused the Great War or the German humiliation of defeat and subsequent loss of pride, accompanied by unreasonable reparation payments and economic instability. They would be know the experience of economic chaos produced by the world wide depression.

Hitler’s medicine, according to Burke, would relieve Germany of its overwhelming guilt (the Jew, not Germany, is to blame for Germany’s woes), supply a goal (the Thousand Year Reich), and provide a quasi-religious endorsement to the whole process. The religious endorsement came through a legacy of the Medieval Church that proclaimed a relationship between Divine Law and Natural Law. Natural Law was the expression of the Will of G-d. The popularity of Social Darwinism at that time, which, Burke points out, “is in accordance with the laws of nature that the ‘Aryan blood’ is superior to all other bloods. Also, the law of the survival of the fittest is God’s law, working through natural law. Hitler used these arguments to justify his pernicious racial anti-Semitism.

A final rhetorical technique used by Hitler was the power of endless repetition. Analysis of his speeches reveal stock anti-Semitic claims used over and over. Another example was that all Nazi circulars advertising meetings contained two complementary slogans: Jews not admitted and War victims free.

**Rhetorical Principles Utilized by Hitler**

Burke’s essay is important because of its delineation of the following rhetorical principles:

1) Belief in a common enemy. Too many enemies lead to objective analysis. Part of the genius of Hitler was his ability to convince his followers that all enemies (inflation, the Great War, the Treaty of Versailles, international capitalism, communism) were caused by the Jew.

2) Simplification. Hitler and Goebbels in their speeches and writings reduced complex economic and social realities into simplistic cause and effect patterns of reasoning. The Jew is the cause; Germany’s ills are the effect. Simplification is a particularly effective rhetorical device with an uncritical population.
3) Materialization of a religious pattern. The patterns of Hitler’s thought are a bastardized or caricatured version of religious thought. Nazi ideology posited the pariah Jew as the devil. The cult of the leader advocated total submersion of will from the Volk to the Führer, an entity that sacrifices all for the people and becomes their savior.

4) Sexual symbolism that runs through *Mein Kampf*: Germany in dispersion is the *dehorned Siegfried*. The German masses are feminine, in need of a dominating male leader. The male as orator woos the masses, wins them, commands them. Rival male Jews would seduce the hapless Aryans.

5) Medicinal appeal of the Jew as scapegoat. Germany as a body politic was contaminated with the blood of the Jews. Germany to be healed must rid its blood of the contaminating Jew. Germany must become *Judenrein*.

   ii. Racial theories became medicinal because they allow Hitler to give a non-economic interpretation of phenomena that were economically engendered. Blame is taken on by racial contamination.

6) Identification.
   i. Hitler is the essence of Volk.
   ii. The Volk identifies completely with their leader.

7) Naming.
   i. Hitler renamed democracy as *majority rule leading to lack of personal responsibility*.
   ii. Hitler distinguished German democracy from U.S. and British democracies. Under the Nazi rules, the masses must relinquish responsibility to the will of the Führer. Interesting question: Is it persuasion when the masses totally subordinate their will to their leader? The answer, of course, is no. It is demagoguery. German democracy is, according to Hitler, the free popular choice of a leader who then accepts responsibility from the masses and demands absolute obedience in exchange for his sacrifice.

**Unification Devices: Hitler’s Quasi-bastardized Religious Rhetoric**

1. of *The inborn dignity the Aryan*. Aryans are elevated above all others by virtue of blood, a “sinister secularized revision of Christian theology.” After the loss of the Great War, the doctrine of inborn superiority that justified conquering inferior races was especially gratifying to the German people.

2. **Projection device.** The ability to hand over one’s ills to a scapegoat to achieve a sense of purification by dissociation. “If one can hand over one's infirmities to a vessel, or cause outside of the self, one can battle an external enemy instead of battling an enemy within.
3. **Symbolic rebirth.** The capacity for rebirth as a purified body politic derives from the projective device of the scapegoat coupled with the doctrine of inborn racial superiority. Working together, the two mechanisms provide followers with a positive new lease on life.

4. **Commercial use.** Hitler provides a non-economic interpretation of economic ills: the Jews are to blame.

5. **Hitler’s Principles of Oratory**
   - Revolutions are solely a function of the spoken word
   - Power of endless repetition
   - Power of spectacle
   - Power of mass meetings so individuals feel protected, surrounded by a movement

**Psychological Mechanisms in the Use of the Scapegoat**

The article “Anti-Semitism in the Service of Defense Mechanisms” delineates the mechanism of *scapegoating* on the psychological level. The author uses case studies to compare how defense mechanisms are employed by anti-Semites. Such people suffer from a sense of loneliness, emptiness, and privation… Basically they reject themselves and envy others. To find a semblance of balance in spite of their frustrations, they mobilize against their anxiety and self-hate in a variety of defense mechanisms. The first of these defense mechanisms is the projection which “permeates the entire personality of the anti-Semite

There is extensive interplay between projection and the auxiliary defenses upon which the anti-Semite relies. The need to attribute to other persons or groups qualities and emotions belonging to the self arises when one cannot face in oneself the conflict created by the existence of these very same qualities and emotions. These accusations against the other person or group [the Jews] are then reinforced by the process of rationalization, a psychic device which provides a plausible justification for an act arising from unconscious motivation.

The author posits the scapegoat as the original ritualistic model for the concept of projection. The goat in pagan ritualistic ceremonies is consigned the sins of those participating in the ceremony and driven off into the wilderness to perish, along with its burden of evil. But there is a crucial distinction between projection as a defense mechanism and the symbolic act of *scapegoating* in religious ritual. The participants in *Leviticus* and pagan ceremonies were aware of their connection with the goat and its role in expiating their sins. The anti-Semite, however, has no clear awareness of the relationship between one’s own conflict and the qualities [attributed] to other people.

This distinction is important in that anti-Semites do not realize the extent to which their anti-Semitism temporarily solves their own psychological problems. Unlike the pagan or
ancient Israelite who consciously employed the scapegoat mechanism and whose guilt and psychic tensions were consciously relieved by the ritual, anti-Semites are unaware of the connection between their need for the Jew as scapegoat and the subsequent feelings of renewal and relief from guilt. But since the relief is only temporary in the cycle of defense mechanisms employed, there is an ongoing need for anti-Semites to express their hostility. As such, the anti-Semite is vulnerable to propaganda on an ongoing basis. This need is best explained by Jacques Ellul’s definition/discussion of propaganda.

**Jacques Ellul on Propaganda**

Jacques Ellul was born in Bordeaux, France on January 6, 1912. During the mid-1930's he was a member of the French Communist Party, and then fought with the French Resistance during World War II. He also taught at Bordeaux’s law school and its Institute of Political Studies. He wrote 43 books, mostly about theology and ethics. He was concerned with how to maintain moral values in a technological society. He died in May of 1994, in Bordeaux. For students of communication, he is most famous for his definition of propaganda:

> Propaganda is a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulation and incorporated in an organization.

Ellul posits propaganda as a necessary instrument for the State and the authorities. His most important observation for purposes here is that for propaganda to be successful, it must correspond to a need in the individual

For propaganda to succeed, it must correspond to a need for propaganda on the individual's part. One can lead a horse to water but cannot make him drink; one cannot reach through propaganda those who do not need what it offers. The propagandee is by no means just an innocent victim. He provides the psychological action of propaganda, and not merely leads himself to it, but even derives satisfaction from it. Without this previous, implicit consent, without this need for propaganda experienced by practically every citizen of the technological age, propaganda could not spread. There is not just a wicked propagandist at work who sets up means to ensnare the innocent citizen. Rather, there is a citizen who craves propaganda from the bottom of his being and a propagandist who responds to this craving. Propagandists would not exist without potential propagandees to begin with. To understand that propaganda is not just a deliberate and more or less arbitrary creation by some people in power is therefore essential. It is a strictly sociological phenomenon, in the sense that it has its roots and reasons in the need of the group that will sustain it.

Ellul alerts the student of Nazi propaganda to the relationship of the need of those receiving the propaganda with those doing the propaganda. We come full circle back to the religious needs of all humans. These needs correspond to the normal religious needs
of the ancient Israelite and pagan for sacrifice and the contemporary psychopathological
need of the modern anti-Semite. The propagandist promises relief and uses any form of
manipulation of truth to effect that relief for the masses who passively and uncritically
follow the bidding of the demagogue.

**Teaching Methods**

On the college level, individual research followed by guided discussions and group
presentations are effective tools for discovery and peer reinforcement of learning.
Collaborative effort such as in a group project is especially relevant to a communication
course. To aid students in their research, bibliographies are distributed on specific topics
of the Holocaust such as resistance, antisemitism, and the concentration camps. In
addition to the plethora of reading lists, bibliographies, and video sources dealing with
the Holocaust, the Web has increasingly provided students and educators with quality
sources of information. Since the Web is a relatively new medium, students are provided
with an updated Web bibliography each semester to facilitate their research. In this paper,
the appendix lists current reputable Websites on the Holocaust. This listing should be
updated each semester since information on the Web changes so fast.

Guided research means that students use a hypothesis or question to organize their
research. I have found that specific questions help focus students’ research and result in
more interesting and in-depth class discussions. The following are examples of study
questions requiring student research.

**Research questions:**

1. What are some distinctions between propaganda and persuasion?
2. What was Goebbels’ philosophy of propaganda (see his speeches)? What was Hitler’s
   philosophy of propaganda (see *Mein Kampf*)?
3. What are images of Hitler used in Nazi films and speeches?
4. What was Julius Streicher's *Der Stürmer*? How did Streicher’s anti-Semitism
   compare with that of Goebbels and Hitler? For information on *Der Stürmer*, access
   [http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/ww2era.htm](http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/ww2era.htm)
5. Analyze Goebbels’ anti-Semitism in terms of its propagandist value. For texts of
   Goebbels’ speeches, go to [http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/goebmain.htm](http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/goebmain.htm)
6. What was the propaganda opportunity provided by the 1933 Berlin games?
7. What are some of the cultural themes from German folklore the Nazis used to
   manipulate in their persuasive appeals?
8. Contrast and compare examples of Nazi propaganda with contemporary neo-Nazi
   propaganda.
Group projects:

Group presentations can be organized around many topics. However, it works best if students select their own topics. In the beginning of the semester, I put students into peer discussion groups that will become presentation groups. Several times a month during class, students convene in these group discussions to address questions such as those listed above. These discussions help students develop cohesiveness and trust and results in more effective presentations.

A list of possible presentation topics is distributed; students select from the list or, more often, generate their own topic with input and approval from the instructor. Suggested presentation topics are as follows:

1. Apply your understanding of propaganda to contemporary political rhetoric. Bring samples from contemporary media to analyze. Contrast them with Nazi propaganda techniques.
2. Contrast the medieval attitude of the Church towards the Jews with the Nazi attitude toward the Jews. How did Enlightenment values affect the traditional relationship between Jew and Christian?
3. How did scientific antisemitism evolve from religious antisemitism? What was the role of Social Darwinism?
4. What is the antisemitic personality? How does the underlying psychological schema correspond to the authoritarian personality?
5. Moral courage is the connection between knowing what is right and doing what is right. How can children be taught moral courage? What cultural traits, such as a value on obedience, might work against the development of moral courage? Use examples from the literature on rescuers and bystanders to illustrate your hypotheses.
6. What are contemporary examples of scapegoating? Apply the model to individuals, groups, as well as to religions and political entities.

Conclusions

Burke connects Hitler’s techniques of propaganda with the goal of scapegoating in his critique of Mein Kampf. Ellul’s definition of propaganda justifies Burke’s juxtaposition of the two concepts. Burke elsewhere explains that is the human capacity for symbolic behavior whereby one quality can substitute for another, blurring psychological boundaries and motives, that permits one to project internal conflicts, feelings of dissonance, self-hate and guilt, onto innocent, external vessels. It is identification that makes symbolic behavior possible.

Tragically, the world has not yet learned that the scapegoat model as depicted in Leviticus is a universal model of human behavior that applies both to individuals as well as to
whole peoples. It needs to be understood clearly lest it continue to be played out tragically on the macro, sociological level as it did during the Third Reich.