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Faulkner, Marilyn Green

Publication Date

2022

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Antisemitism and the Uses of Rhetoric: Purpose, Power, and Possibilities

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Religious Studies

by

Marilyn Green Faulkner

September 2022

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Michael Alexander, Chairperson

Dr. Paul Chang

Dr. Pashaura Singh

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2022

The Dissertation of Marilyn Green Faulkner is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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Antisemitism and the Uses of Rhetoric: Process, Power, and Possibilities

Introduction

Rhetoric, most simply defined as persuasive communication, has been a subject of study for over 2500 years, since Aristotle wrote his foundational text, *The Art of Rhetoric*. Ryan Skinnell gives us a brief sketch of its importance in history:

Rhetoric is actually one of Western Civilization's oldest arts. Aristotle wrote a textbook about it almost 2500 years ago. Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton all studied it in school. And John Quincy Adams taught it at Harvard in the early 1800s. For as long as formal schooling has existed in Europe and the United States, rhetoric has been a part of the curriculum in some form or fashion, and it still is. (Skinnell 51)

The study of rhetoric is currently experiencing a resurgence in popularity, due in part to the proliferation of social media platforms, which has expanded the scope of rhetorical discourse and made an understanding of rhetorical devices even more crucial as we witness the dramatic (and sometimes deadly) effects of persuasive speech in real time.

This paper will examine various types of rhetoric used throughout history to isolate and target Jews. The first to be examined is a rhetoric of authority observable in the use of sacred texts as a divine mandate to justify immoral actions against the Jews. Next is the rhetoric of paranoia perfected by Adolph Hitler and still popular on social media, which taps into basic fears common to all human beings and ties the alleviation of those fears to the eradication of a threatening group. Third, and perhaps most insidious, is the largely invisible, coded rhetoric that creates a "safe space" for more radical hate

speech and often results in heinous acts of violence. This has been called by one scholar the rhetoric of “consubstantiality” (Allen 4). Finally, this paper will examine some on-the-ground examples of positive rhetoric that scholars and faith leaders are employing, such as careful translation, socially sensitive hermeneutics, and the use of the personal narrative to overcome the negative and possibly dangerous uses of persuasive speech.

The fact that social media has dramatically increased the effectiveness of antisemitic rhetoric is evident in the annual announcement of the top ten outbreaks of antisemitism and anti-Israelism published by the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a human rights organization. In 2020 the first place in antisemitic activity went to the various conspiracy theories blaming Jews for the COVID-19 pandemic. The center reported that this was just one in a long line of charges connecting Jews to pandemics but that now the use of social media platforms ensures that baseless charges like these reach a far greater number of people, causing far more damage: “From the earliest stages of the pandemic in February 2020, far-right extremists across social media platforms blamed Jews and Asian Americans for the virus. Antisemites have blamed Jews for the medieval Black Plague to the WWI Spanish Flu. In the 1930s Nazi propoganda compared Jews to vermin who spread disease.” (Wiesenthal 2020 Top Ten 1)

It is no wonder that social media has become the tool of choice for antisemitic groups. This year, the second-place designation did not go to an antisemitic group or organization, but to an entire social media platform, in this case Telegram, which was picked up by President Trump when he was blocked from Twitter. The Wiesenthal

Center explains the impact that this uncensored social media site has had, as a new gathering place for hatred, on the Jewish community:

Neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and many others turn to Telegram, a platform with little or no rules or content moderation. The murderous Atomwaffen Division; its successor, the National Socialist Order; extremist The Base; the Boogaloo Movement; and the violent Nordic Resistance movement that targeted Jewish institutions on Yom Kippur in four Scandinavian countries have all found a home on Telegram. Hamas and other Islamist terrorists with hate and violence agendas also have active feeds targeting their enemies. (Wiesenthal 2020)

The entry for third place on the list for 2021 surprised many: the British Broadcasting Corporation, which was named as a center for antisemitic activity just after Iran and Hamas. The paper's insistence on labeling all residents of Israel "settlers" was noted, along with an allegedly inaccurate report about a group of Jewish teens attacked on a bus. The most egregious act committed by the BBC was once again linked to social media when a BBC reporter, after suggesting in a private post that all Jews should be moved to the United States, tweeted the following hashtags: "#hitlerwasright and #IsraelismoreNazithanHitler." (Wiesenthal 2021 Top Ten 3) The center noted the devastating effect that representatives of a trusted news source can have by saying things on their private social media sites that would not be countenanced in a traditional newspaper and concluded: "The UK Jewish community is reeling from attacks. Britain's Jewish Community Trust (CST) says that the Israeli/Hamas war in May led to 639 anti-Jewish hate incidents, the highest monthly incidents ever recorded. There were 1,308

anti-Semitic incidents nationwide between January and June 2021, a 49% increase over 2020.” (Wiesenthal 2021 Top Ten 3)

When presented in an easily readable print format and in a rhetorical style that suggests scientific research, even the most outlandish assertions (such as the claim that a flu virus originating in mainland China is the work of the Jews) can seem reliable to some simply because it is in print. Social media is even more powerful than traditional print because is just that: social; it creates a quasi-community through its interactive features. This was seen in the events that unfolded following the election in January 2020. Through posts and reposts on Telegram, protestors on the ground in Washington D.C. coalesced into a deadly army of invaders, urged on by thousands of “watchers,” who were following the action in real time online. Disparate groups that would not otherwise have found each other came together, including white supremacists and others intent on the destruction of the Jews, in a grim demonstration that, as one historian writes, “language and rhetoric can result in deadly actions” (Griech-Polelle 1).

The Rhetoric of God: Sacred Texts and Social Conscience

In most cultures, religious beliefs are central to the formation of ethical codes and, at some point in their history, most faith traditions establish a written record of these codes along with their beliefs, myths, and normative behaviors. Eventually these sacred texts become fixed into a canonical state and are accepted as scripture, thus taking on an added measure of authority. Canonized scripture is a unique form of rhetoric because it cannot shift with changing social tides; it is fixed and unchangeable. Rather than merely a

compilation of statements (some inspired and some not) every word in a scriptural text may be accepted by orthodox believers as *kerygma*, or direct messages from God.

Kerygma is a mode of rhetoric, though it is a rhetoric of a special kind. It is, like all rhetoric, a mixture of the metaphorical and the “existential” but, unlike practically all other forms of rhetoric, it is not an argument disguised by figuration. It is the vehicle of what is traditionally called revelation . . . [or] the conveying of information from an objective divine source to a subjective human receptor. *Kerygma* is the rhetoric of God.” (Frye 29)

Scripture is the means through which this “rhetoric of God” comes to various groups of believers. Use of the term *scripture* has been called into question by some, since the word itself carries with it the considerable sociocultural baggage created by centuries of privileging Western tradition. To those who have been the victims of various forms of persecution in the name of God, scripture can be a dirty word. Dale Martin reminds us of the number of cruel and inhuman acts that have been and are committed under the supposed sanction of scriptural authority and concludes with a warning: “Surely the dangers of language about “authority” should not be lost on any Christian of our world. There is no way language about authority can be used without provoking overtones of hierarchy, inequality, patriarchy, and injustice, at least to those people attuned to injustice and yearning for equality and mutuality.” (Martin 93)

In the face of such connotations, one is tempted to discard the term *scripture* in favor of something more neutral, such as *sacred text*, which Israel Hepzibah defines as “any text, object or sound perceived as sacred or holy or used for any purpose considered sacred by a faith community, given the myriad ways in which ideas and experiences of

the sacred manifest themselves” (Hepzibah, 323). However, Wilfred Cantwell Smith reminds us that even though the word *scripture* comes laden with vestiges of Western colonialism, its use may be defended both despite and because of these connotations, and invites us to enlarge our definition of the word rather than to discard it: “The West has long tended to derive its concept of scripture from the Bible; it is not amiss to suggest that we are now in a position where our understanding of the Bible, and of much else across the world, may begin to be derived from a larger concept of scripture” (Smith, 63). Vincent Wimbush agrees that the problematic nature of the term *scripture* itself is useful in that it invites a “radical excavation” of the problem:

We must together engage in the sociology, anthropology, the cultural history, the psychosocial logics, the performance-expressive, the material and political criticism of “scriptures.” With this different orientation or agenda, the primary focus should be placed not upon texts *per se* (that is, upon their content meanings), but upon textures, gestures, and power—namely the signs, material products, ritual practices and performances, expressivities orientations, ethics, and politics associated with the phenomenon of the invention and uses of “scriptures.” (Wimbush 3)

Since scripture represents the voice of authority in the lived experience of a significant number of people today, we may be justified in placing any argument about the use of the term “scripture” within Wimbush’s framework. For the purposes of this paper the terms sacred texts and scripture will be used interchangeably.

When the Canon Becomes a Weapon

To illustrate the use and abuse of sacred texts, we may examine one issue that has been the subject of debate for nearly two millennia, namely, certain statements in the New Testament that accuse the Jews, as a group, of deicide in the death of Jesus Christ. Though he was put to death by a Roman cohort, accounts of Christ's crucifixion in two of the gospels and in the letters of Paul place the blame for his death on the Jewish leaders. The following passage from Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica (considered by many scholars to be one of the oldest documents in the Christian Bible) is typical of statements in the New Testament that appear to hold the Jews, as a group, culpable for the death of Jesus: "For you, brothers [and sisters], became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did by the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone." (Thessalonians 2:14–15 NIVⁱ)

Paul's comments, combined with purported statements of Jesus in the gospels that are highly critical of certain Jewish leaders, have been used throughout subsequent history to justify various forms of violence against Jews, culminating in the Holocaust of World War II and continuing today. Scriptural statements like these, enshrined in a canon, have an aura of truth attached to them that can be deadly. In her book, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*, Karen Armstrong calls out the "dynamic of hatred" that can be found in the New Testament:

The violence and the incitement to war that have been such a scandalous characteristic of Christian history can be found in the pages of the New Testament. Unless we recognize that this dynamic of hatred is deeply embedded in our most sacred traditions, we will not be able to transcend it nor deal effectively with those Christians who still subscribe to such an ethic. . . . We must learn to see the anguish of the Jews after the Holocaust, recognizing that without a thousand years of Christian anti-Semitism, Hitler's Nazi crusade would not have been possible. (Armstrong 35)

Scripture is neither written nor read in a vacuum. From the midrash of the Hebrew scholars to the writings of the early monastics, the Bible has been subject to constant interpretation, which has subsequently become part of the doctrine of the church. Even Luther's passionate demand that the Bible should be open to individual interpretation had a limit; R. S. Sugirtharajah reminds us that he later substituted his own interpretation instead:

One of the enduring myths of biblical scholarship has been that Protestantism encouraged the free examination of scriptures. . . . The aim of the Reformers was not to grant the masses uncontrolled access to the scriptures but to impose their own theological positions on them and reject any ecclesiastical intervention. Although Martin Luther initially invited everyone to read the Bible, he [later] changed his mind. . . . [He] said: "The catechism is the laymen's Bible; it contains the whole of what every Christian must know of Christian doctrine." (Sugirtharajah 63)

Though Martin Luther was at odds on a variety of issues with the Catholic Church, he interpreted the scriptural passages reviling the Jews with just as much malevolence as they did. In his later life he used his considerable rhetorical gifts to make a scapegoat of the Jews:

Therefore be on your guard against the Jews, knowing that wherever they have their synagogues, nothing is found but a den of devils in which sheer self-glory, conceit, lies, blasphemy, and defaming of God and men are practiced most maliciously and vehemingly with his eyes on them. . . . Moreover, they are nothing but thieves and robbers who daily eat no morsel and wear no thread of clothing which they have not stolen and pilfered from us by means of their accursed usury. Thus, they live from day to day, together with wife and child, by theft and robbery, as arch thieves and robbers, in the most impenitent security. (Luther 1593)

Supported by doctrinal interpretations that identified Jews as “Christ killers,” both Catholics and Protestants viewed the Jews as a people under a curse, which made them an easy target to blame for economic and social uncertainty. Rhetoric that labeled them as a tightly-knit *kabbal*, or conspiracy, helped achieve another important goal: rather than betraying individual friends and associates who were Jewish, one could feel secure in opposing the Jews as a group. In time, opposing the Jews as a people came to be seen as supporting Christianity. Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson admits that no amount of spin can erase the impact of both the Biblical passages and their interpretation: “The scurrilous language used about Jews in the earliest Christian writings is a hurdle neither Jew nor Christian can easily surmount. It is a source of shame (finally) to Christians, and a well-grounded source of fear to Jews” (Johnson 420).

Too Little, Too Late: *Nostra Aetate*

In 1965, finally addressing mounting evidence of their part in the atrocities against the Jews during World War II, the Catholic Church issued *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican II document that denies the claim of deicide in the death of Christ. The very

existence of the document underscores the devastating power of the scriptural statements it addresses.

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. . . . Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone. (Levine 270)

After reviewing the distressing history of such liturgical pieces as the Good Friday prayer (which asks God to bless “the perfidious Jews; that almighty God may remove the veil from their hearts”), Didier Pollefeyt places the responsibility on Christian leaders to alter dangerous interpretations of scripture when necessary. He reports that the Catholic Church and many Protestant sects are finally stepping away from the supersessionist view that undermines any attempt at true reconciliation between Jews and Christians and cites with approval the words of Pope Francis, who in his 2015 Address to International Council for Christians declared:

Judaism and the Christian faith as seen in the New Testament are two ways by which God's people can make the Sacred Scriptures of Israel their own. The Scriptures which Christians call the Old Testament is open therefore to both ways. A response to God's word of salvation that accords with one or the other tradition can thus open up access to God, even if it is left up to his counsel of

salvation to determine in what way he may intend to save mankind in each instance. (Pollefeyt 286)

Pollefeyt observes: “*Nostra Aetate* was symbolically a theological breakthrough but . . . it has often been too easily over-interpreted in an optimistic way by Catholic theologians as the overcoming of supersessionism and as the definitive recognition of the intrinsic salvific value of Judaism” (Pollefeyt 280). Though he believes *Nostra Aetate* represents some progress, Pollefeyt voices his concern that the papal statement does little to address the issue of how such statements as the one above continues to inflict harm. Luke Timothy Johnson concurs that, in the end, people respond both to *what they hear* (sacred texts) and to *how it is explained* (hermeneutics) in a church setting and that it seems unlikely that hermeneutics alone (for example, an explanation of the complicated historical context of the polemic used in the time of Christ) can effectively take the sting out of the invective that is heard in many scriptural passages when read as part of the liturgy.

Kerygma for Moderns: Scientific Jargon and Antisemitism

A brief history of the word *antisemitism* illustrates the skillful use of rhetoric to cloak an ugly truth in the garb of science.ⁱⁱ The term *anti-Semite* (original spelling) was popularized by Wilhelm Marr, a journalist who lost his position at a German newspaper in the economic downturn of 1873. Convinced that his dismissal was the result of a Jewish plot at the paper, which was in turn part of a larger conspiracy by the Jews to undermine German society, Marr penned a pamphlet titled *The Victory of Jewry over Germandom*. (In order to disassociate himself from radical Christian groups who opposed

the Jews, he subtitled the pamphlet *Regarded from a Non-denominational Point of View*.) Restating many of the traditional diatribes against the Jews and adding a dollop of social Darwinism by naming the Aryan race as the most fit to survive, the pamphlet appealed to a rising tide of antisemitism in Germany at the time. It was an immediate success and went through several editions.

As he began to share his ideas with various groups, however, Marr quickly realized that more sophisticated, well-educated Germans recoiled at the idea of being classed as “Jew-haters” (*judenhass*), so in place of this term Marr created a new term, *anti-Semitic*. *Semite* was the word used by linguists to denote the speakers of languages in the Middle East and North Africa, and this linguistic group also included the ancient Hebrews. Marr knew that creating the negative compound word *anti-Semite* would immediately be understood to mean “anti-Jewish” but sound far less vulgar, as if the term came from the world of science.

Beth Griech-Polelle explains how simply changing the name from something that included the word “hate” to a term that sounded purely clinical helped make antisemitism acceptable to a higher, better-educated class of people. She writes, “Marr was able to place his terminology within the confines of science and this gave the term a wide range appeal. The word is so appealing to its alternative of ‘Jew hatred’ that we still use it today” (Griech-Polelle 1).

Since the use of the term antisemitism has become so common it is worth defining. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s descriptor (which has

since been adopted by the European Parliament) offers the following definition:

“Antisemitism: a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism that are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities” (Griech-Poelle 2).

Deborah Lipstadt suggests that in addition to this rather spare description, some important elements noted by historical sociologist Helen Fein are helpful:

Antisemitism: A persisting latent structure of hostile beliefs towards Jews *as a collectivity* manifested in *individuals* as attitudes, and in *culture* as myth, ideology, folklore, and imagery, and in *actions*—social or legal discrimination, political mobilization against Jews, and collective or state violence—which results in and/or is designed to distance, displace, or destroy Jews as Jews. (Lipstadt, 15; emphasis in original)

Unpacking these definitions sheds some light on the way that antisemitic speech, when presented rhetorically in the guise of scientific data, may seem relatively harmless. But it may then gain entrance into mainstream thought and be shared as an attitude in the culture through myth and imagery, eventually leading to actions, such as discrimination, distancing, and even destruction of property and lives.

Adolf Hitler realized early on that hate speech and emotional outbursts were not in themselves sufficient to win the day with the German people. At the age of thirty, while still an intelligence officer in the German army, he wrote to a comrade: “Anti-Semitism as a political movement may not and cannot be determined by flashes of

emotion, but rather through the understanding of facts . . . a clear understanding of the consciously or unconsciously systematic degenerative effect of the Jews on the totality of our nation” (Griech-Poelle 4). Eventually Hitler developed a style of rhetoric that combined seemingly factual content with emotionally charged accusations, and thus perfected the rhetoric of paranoia.

The Rhetoric of Paranoia: Positioning Jews as the “Other”

When challenged by crises, human beings naturally look for some cause other than their own weaknesses or plain bad luck. When people lose their jobs or when their traditional values come under scrutiny, they may question their own identities, and in such a climate of fear and uncertainty paranoia can take root. Merriam-Webster defines *paranoia* (the clinical entity) as “a chronic mental disorder characterized by systematized delusions of persecution and of one’s own greatness” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *paranoia*). Like most mental illnesses, traces of paranoia can be found in every person, and discourse that builds upon these tendencies in otherwise “normal” human beings can have devastating consequences. The situation becomes worse,” writes Richard Hofstadter in his book, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, “when the representatives of a particular political interest—perhaps because of the very unrealistic and unrealizable nature of their demands—cannot make themselves felt in the political process. Feeling that they have no access to political bargaining or the making of decisions, they find their original conception of the world of power as omnipotent, sinister, and malicious finally confirmed” (Hofstadter 20).

As the nineteenth century progressed Europe shifted from an agrarian to an industrial society, and Jews moved into a position of power due to their participation in distribution, lending, and commerce. As their growing economic strength became identified with the world of power resentment toward them grew. Into this fertile ground went seeds of doubt and fear generated by quasi-scientific theories about the biological nature of the Jewish people. Over time it became acceptable to view them as, literally, a breed apart: “The threatening imagery of “the Jew,” writes Griech-Polelle, “was built up over the course of centuries. Destructive legends, myths, and stereotypes all contributed to a type of acceptable language about Jews which enabled Hitler to play upon well-established tropes. Images of the “diabolical, cunning” Jew could be used to instill fear and anxiety and could serve as an explanation as to why an average German person felt stymied in their personal and professional development. They were told repeatedly that the enemy, the Jew, was standing in their way of creating a peaceful, harmonious society united by commonly shared principles. Only by destroying the “other,” the message went, can “we” emerge triumphant and victorious” (Griech-Polelle 73).

Hofstadter explains how tapping into the paranoid delusions already present in each individual psyche can grow into a devastating mob psychology when utilized by a skillful rhetorician who convinces a group of people that they share a common threat. The sufferer is no longer alone; he or she is part of a group, a community of sufferers who can band together. A sense of identity is found in belonging to a group, and fear is an effective means of uniting people of very different backgrounds:

There is a vital difference between the paranoid spokesman in politics and the clinical paranoiac: although they both tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression, the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically *against him*; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others (Hofstadter 20).

The rhetoric of paranoia bolsters the fear that “our” way of life, “our” culture, will be corrupted by close association with the aliens that dwell in “our” midst; “we” must keep “our” race pure. In Europe the Jews were forced into the margins of feudal society, and by the 1200’s Catholic nations had enacted a series of laws that went beyond excluding Jews from property ownership; statutes prohibited everything from intermarriage with Jews to simply eating with them. Jewish men were required to wear silly, pointed hats in public, and Jewish women to wear veils with “Jew badges” affixed to their outer clothing (Griech-Polelle 19). The more Jews were excluded from society, the less they were perceived as individuals, and the easier it was to demonize them as impure and unclean. As long as they looked and acted like their Gentile neighbors it was easier to see Jews as fellow human beings. But a Jew in a pointed hat or with a badge on his clothing was obviously alien.

From Different to Demonic

Finally, to maximize their ostracism, Jews were portrayed as possessing demonic qualities: Jews were lascivious, greedy, gluttonous, and took part in strange rituals that involved drinking the blood of Christian children. Though all these claims were blatantly

false, accepting them as facts allowed disgruntled citizens to adopt a fresh new identity based on separation from an unclean group. In addition, the Jews were thought to control the economy and the press: the very seat of power. Thus, not only did they need to be controlled, but they also needed to be silenced:

Very often the enemy is held to possess some especially effective source of power: he controls the press; he directs the public mind through “managed news”; he has unlimited funds; he has a new secret for influencing the mind (brain washing); he has a special technique for seduction (the Catholic confessional); he is gaining a stranglehold on the educational system. . . . These writers illustrate the central preconception of the paranoid style—the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character (Hofstadter 32).

The final component in the rhetoric of paranoia is the sense of impending bombardment. “The enemy is approaching; time is running out! We must act now and not delay or our society will be overrun with evil.” This appeal to fear shows how quickly the rhetoric of paranoia can transition to the rhetoric of violence. The key to a successful transition is in creating a sense of urgency, as Hofstadter explains:

The paranoid is a militant leader. He does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of the working politician. Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, the quality needed is not a willingness to compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. . . . The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms—he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization. He constantly lives at a turning point: it is now or never in

organizing resistance to conspiracy. Time is forever just running out (Hofstadter 29).

Considering the attraction that paranoid theories (at least on some level) hold for Americans, Hofstadter concludes: “In the end the real mystery, for one who reads the primary works of paranoid scholarship, is not how the United States has been brought to its present dangerous position, but how it has managed to survive at all” (Hofstadter, 25).

Consubstantiality: Creating a Safe Haven for Hatred

The Holocaust was carried out over a period of twelve years in over forty thousand locations, by hundreds and even thousands of citizens, very few of whom rebelled against the outrages they were asked to commit.ⁱⁱⁱ In an attempt to understand how this could have happened, Deborah Lipstadt writes:

Antisemitism flourishes in a society that is intolerant of others, be they immigrants or racial and religious minorities. When expressions of contempt for one group become normative, it is virtually inevitable that similar hatred will be directed at other groups. Like a fire set by an arsonist, passionate hatred and conspiratorial worldviews reach well beyond their intended target. They are not rationally contained (Lipstadt 42).

The susceptibility of the German people to the rhetoric of paranoia would be disturbing if it were an isolated case, but it was not. The events at the United States Capitol building on January 6, 2020, demonstrate that the rhetoric of paranoia can be just as effective today in causing people to turn on their fellow human beings in the most egregious fashion. In both cases, and many others, disparate groups that did not share the

same ideologies banded together to carry out what they considered to be a common objective. In the case of the German people, it was the eradication of the Jews. But the raid on the capitol building following the election was supposedly aimed at a different objective in response to what was perceived as a fraudulent victory by the Democratic party. So why did this uprising attract a significant number of antisemitic groups?

This leads to the third component in the rhetoric of antisemitism: the coded language of consubstantiality, a phrase coined by rhetoricians to describe the way hate speech of any kind opens the door for a variety of negative consequences. In an article titled “Who Owns Donald Trump’s Antisemitism?” Ira J. Allen begins by citing several examples of Trump’s pro-Israel stance and his positive personal connections to Jews, including, of course, his own family connection through his son-in-law Jerod Kushner. As president, Trump consistently took Israel’s side in various issues and (though he verbally attacked almost every other racial and ethnic group) he consistently steered clear of any direct statements opposing the Jews. Given his track record it stretches credibility, claims Allen, to label Trump an antisemite (Allen 1089).

Why then, did Trump’s election in 2016 signal general rejoicing in white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups? Can Trump be held accountable for the 86 percent rise in antisemitic incidents that followed his election (Allen 1)? “Indeed, Trump’s winning of the presidency was immediately celebrated by a wide range of antisemitic and other hate groups,” Allen says. “Racialized hate and Trumpism are different, but they are together. And they are together through a series of symbolic identifications ranging from shared

slogans to shared practices of violence” (Allen 1034). To understand how a leader can be both *philosophically* opposed to antisemitism yet *materially* supportive of it, Allen introduces us to a term first coined by Kenneth Burke:

Consubstantiality . . . is a term for the way ideas and attitudes become substantially entwined by being placed with each other. For instance, consubstantiality describes how flags waving together can make alliances real, alongside and regardless of the flag-wavers’ explicit intentions. As Burke puts it, “in acting together, men [sic] have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial. Or, as neuroscientists say of the pathways in the brain that make us who we are, neurons that fire together wire together. There is a firing-together that twins the public shamelessness of racialized hate with Trumpism, and makes them substantially one. (Allen 1035)

The Consequences of Coded Rhetoric

This form of coded rhetoric came to a startling climax in the weeks preceding and following the January 6 raid on the Capitol, as widely disparate groups from both the far left and the far right combined to wreak havoc on that and other public spaces. Though their political and philosophical opinions did not coincide, the various groups were united in their desire to tear down the existing power structure. The Christian Science Monitor editorialized that this could signal a frightening new era in American history:

From Oregon to Texas and Michigan to Washington, D.C., stark scenes like this have proliferated nationwide over the past year, underscoring the growing radicalization of extremist groups on both ends of the American political spectrum. The Jan. 6 storming of the Capitol in Washington

exposed this ugly intolerance in graphic form. “The genie is out of the bottle,” says Chris Loftis, spokesman for the Washington State Patrol. . . . Indeed, 20 years after foreign extremists crashed planes into the Pentagon and World Trade Center, killing thousands and unleashing a global war on terrorism, Americans are waking up to a new, post-9/11 era defined by the need to combat a more insidious and potentially damaging threat: the escalating spiral of homegrown radicalism in their own backyard (Tyson 1).

Perhaps when it comes to creating rhetoric that symbolically lays out the welcome mat for a variety of antisemitic and other extremist groups, Donald Trump is an “unconscious competent” (to borrow a phrase from adaptive learning technologies), meaning that he naturally plays on the fears of others through his rhetorical style. Or perhaps his intent is deliberate, and he seeks to appear friendly to the Jews while simultaneously courting constituent groups that seek their annihilation. Allen warns against underestimating Trump’s ability to say one thing and mean another:

Because artful deception is central to Trump’s rhetoric, I think it is misleading to describe the president as a demagogue, fascist, or psycho if only because such labels fail to capture the skillful way in which Trump’s rhetoric affirms and denies at the same time, cleaving his behavior from his presumed personhood, and this during a time in which the art of politics encourages their convergence, conflation, or confusion. It is the cynical suspicion of the difference between what Trump says and who he “really” is—the smirking, presumed difference—that has “changed politics” and confounded pundits in recent years. (Allen, 1011)

While it may not be possible to plumb the depths of Donald Trump’s psyche, his rise to power and his continued popularity with a large segment of the population shows that he has mastered both the style and the dissemination of the rhetoric of paranoia, and

his ability to draw extremist groups with widely differing points of view shows his mastery of the coded rhetoric of consubstantiality. And, given the statistics about social media that opened this paper, it is not surprising that his preferred method of communication is rhetoric in 140 characters or less, posted on Twitter and similar sites. With as many as two hundred tweets per day, Trump communicated directly with millions of followers, even using the platform to announce his departure from the Whitehouse and his refusal to attend President Biden's inauguration.^{iv} Just how much responsibility Trump must assume in relation to the increase in antisemitic activity is directly connected to an understanding of the consubstantial nature of hateful speech; it casts a wide net that can bring several marginalized groups into danger.

Possibilities: Socially Responsible Rhetoric

Even with careful translation and exegesis, the fact remains that readers and listeners respond to rhetoric rather than academic interpretation, and the rhetoric of antisemitism, enshrined in scriptural and political discourse, continues to shout down reason and decency. Beth Grieger-Polelle writes:

The Holocaust raised powerful and disturbing questions for all of human society. It is not simply a "Jewish-thing." It is a universal "thing." Language fails to fully convey the suffering, the violence, and the visceral sights and smells that people experienced during the Holocaust. But we must explore the suffering as best as we can if we are to fully explore the question: "Can humanity be trusted after the Holocaust?" (Polelle 21)

Armstrong argues that it is up to us to view scripture differently and encourages academics and clergy to lead out in the effort to reexamine our relationship with sacred texts:

We cannot treat the Bible as though it were a holy encyclopedia which will provide us with clear information about either God or human conduct. Continually we will find one idea contradicted a few pages later—as in this vexed question of war and violence. What the paradox of the gospel view of war teaches us is the difficulty of implementing any divine imperative in our flawed world. It is always going to be a struggle to practice benevolence and compassion in a violent, dangerous world. Love of “us” can so easily modulate into hatred of “them,” and that, tragically, is what has happened so often in Christian history. (Armstrong 44)

Sperl concurs with Armstrong that a good starting point is a more honest admission of the hostile elements in sacred text, and to find points of connection rather than difference:

[This] encourages an approach to scripture motivated not by the needs of one community in its opposition to, and struggle with, another, but motivated instead by the needs of the global community which is faced today with the daunting necessity of co-existence in conditions of mutual dependency, proximity, and inter-mixture never previously experienced in history. If the scriptures of all cultures are approached with this objective in mind, the remarkable degree of convergence in the ethical and spiritual values to which they give expression may well appear as the most significant shared and tangible crystallization of scriptural truth. They also rank uppermost among the needs of the age. (Sperl 186)

Scripture is more than text; its language resonates with our innermost thoughts, feelings, and memories. Sacred texts are recited in our homes and in our places of worship; they are the scaffolding upon which our beliefs about God, ourselves, and our

place in the universe is built. Thus, “changing our minds” about traditional interpretations of these texts can be difficult:

Our most prominent experiences of conscience arise when we face a conflict between two incompatible norms—for example, secular law and religious conviction. There is no proceeding automatically in the face of this conflict. If we see both as normative—if we have adopted an “internal point of view” with respect to each—the conflict will call us to attention. We will be forced to decide which norm to follow, and the process of so doing will require that we engage in conscious deliberation. (Sepinwall 226)

Hepzibah Israel asks: “Amid the clash of critical methods, we have reason to wonder: Is there a measure (or metron) in heaven or earth that may orient us for thought and responsible action? Technological rationalities often diminish our personal value and interpersonal relationships, whereas abstract norms ignore the pathos of living experience. So, where might one turn?” He suggests that as we attempt to live ethical lives and consider the theological underpinnings of our behavior,

sudden ruptures may occur in our everyday attitudes that “indicate the outlines of new perceptions of Being. . . . Defenses fall and our fundamental fragility is suddenly manifest, at least for the moment. But if we hold firm, this crisis may yield a re-formed consciousness or attitude. Two fundamental dispositions can result: the first is humility; the other, moral awareness: the “hermeneutic of responsibility.” (Israel 422)

The responsibility of those involved in scriptural hermeneutics should include the realization that just because a text claims to be the voice of God, it must not override the obligation of each human being to value the life and liberty of fellow human beings.

There can be no excuse for harming another person based on their beliefs, ethnic or racial

connections, or because of interpretations differing from one's own perceived position in the eternal scheme of things. If sacred texts contain any intrinsic meaning at all, surely it is that people are more important than polemic.

The growing polarity in our society seems to have solidified the stance of opposing sides, each fearing and distrusting the other, and this fear of “the other” is used as proof that each side is really ferreting out the truth. Devorah Baum asks, “So, are you paranoid? Possibly. Then again, isn't that also what all critical thinking feels like? Paranoia has worked hard to more or less completely obliterate its status as a feeling at all. It has done so by fleeing into a realm that the paranoiac might like to imagine as free of feeling—the realm of thought” (Baum 125).

Some of the worst conflicts in the world today are carried out under the umbrella of sacred text; God's blessing is invoked on a variety of heinous acts through the misuse of scripture. The problem is not going away; in fact, it seems to be growing worse as, in a reaction to widespread secularism, every faith tradition spawns neo-orthodox splinter groups. A society made up of many cultures cannot simply hope for a cessation of hostilities; every effort must be taken to root out the sources of hate speech. How we talk matters because nature abhors a vacuum, and that applies to discourse; spaces in discourse will inevitably be inhabited by those who espouse a more extreme and harmful version of what more mainstream voices are saying. Examining the purposes behind the rhetoric can be useful in identifying this space.

Christians and Jews alike had better emerge together from the ghetto of mere detailed academic debate and contribute to a public dialogue and action that would promote world peace. One can study the historical Jesus ad infinitum, but only by actual peacemaking is he positively revered and affirmed, instead of being rejected due to negligence by those who pretend to know so much about him. (Scheffler 272)

Resurrecting the One: The Power of the Personal Narrative

It is both heartening and important to recognize the possibilities of positive rhetoric in the public sphere. Certain forms of rhetoric can be used to “hold . . . a mirror up to nature” (*Hamlet* III: ii:18–20) and inspire people with a wider perspective. One very powerful rhetorical device is the use of the personal narrative.

The personal narrative reverses the flow of “group speak” and forces the student of history to view an experience in a deeply personal way. The rhetoric of paranoia tends to shift the focus from the individual to the group; a group is easier to target, to demonize, and to attack. The personal narrative reverses that trend; an individual has a face, a group does not, and thus the individual story is harder to ignore. This has proven to be one of the most effective ways of combatting Holocaust denial. Using personal narratives, Holocaust survivors have succeeded in creating a positive form of consubstantiality: their stories create rhetorical spaces where compassion and even empathy may flourish. Rather than sinking to the level of the rhetoric of paranoia or trying to counter the pretext of scholarship with more and better facts, survivors of the genocide simply stand as witnesses of what they experienced. These narratives follow the

pattern of all great literature by reducing the many to one: one life, one story, one set of emotions, hopes, goals, ambitions, loves and hates, in other words, one human being striving to find or make meaning in a confusing world.

Shakespeare created a model of the personal narrative for future generations with his use of the soliloquy.^v The *Merchant of Venice* begins with the familiar caricature of a greedy Jew made popular by Marlowe and others; this is truly an antisemitic play. But, as Shakespearean scholar Harold Bloom explains, Shakespeare cannot resist adding another layer of depth to the character: “That Shakespeare himself was personally antisemitic we reasonably cannot doubt; but Shylock is one of those Shakespearean characters that seem to break clean away from the plays’ confines.” (Bloom 714) For the first time (since there were virtually no Jews in England at the time), audience members were asked to relate to a Jew, not as a type, but as a fellow human being. Though Shylock retains many of the characteristics of the stereotypical Jewish moneylender, he challenges his audience to see him as something more.

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands,
organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with
the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the
same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and
cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is.
(Merchant of Venice: III,i)

Conclusion: The Positive Possibilities of Rhetoric

Memoirs by individuals such as Anne Frank, Viktor Frankl, Edith Eger, Primo Levi, and Elie Wiesel, to name just a few, have touched the lives of millions of readers, simply by telling their own story. “I am a Jew,” they say. “This is what I am like; I am like you, and this is what happened to me, simply because I am a Jew.” Six million people who innocently suffered and died is too great a number for most to fathom, but one can more easily relate to the memories and stories of another person and establish that “cord of communion” (to use Charlotte Bronte’s phrase) that connects one to the suffering that was repeated in every individual life lost or ruined in that genocide. This might be termed the rhetoric of reconciliation, that is, persuasive speech that leads an individual to make a connection with other individuals, no matter what their beliefs:

The rhetoric of reconciliation . . . enables a believer to overcome a faith-related issue of cognitive dissonance. . . . Believers so often are, above all, seekers of healing—healing of brokenness and divisiveness. These roles are also the roles of the rhetor-communicator, facilitator, mediator. (Fehler 121)

The impact of negative rhetoric on the devastating conflicts and criminal conflagrations of society is well documented; persuasive speech is often the beginning of very bad things. On the other hand, great movements have been started and brought forward through the rhetoric of hope. The persecution of the Jewish people, culminating in the Holocaust, created a crucible out of which a few individuals arose with incredible influence as they spoke truth to power, repudiating the rhetoric of fear and embracing the opportunity for each individual to make moral choices. Viktor Frankl famously said,

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom” (Frankl,109). His words carried the weight of his suffering as well as his hope for better responses in the future as men and women use rhetoric to illuminate rather than to throw a veil over the truth.

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Appendix 1: The New Testament passages under discussion.
(All texts are from the New International Version (NIV))

John 4:22

You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.

Romans 11:28

As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs,

Mark 14:43-46

Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders.⁴⁴ Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: “The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.”⁴⁵ Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, “Rabbi!” and kissed him. ⁴⁶ The men seized Jesus and arrested him.

John 19:11

¹¹ Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.”

Acts 4:27

²⁷ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

Mark 15:1-15

Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

²“Are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate.

“You have said so,” Jesus replied.

³The chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴So again Pilate asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.”

⁵But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

⁶Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. ⁷A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. ⁸The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

⁹“Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate, ¹⁰knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. ¹¹But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

¹²“What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them.

¹³“Crucify him!” they shouted.

¹⁴“Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

¹⁵Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. ¹⁴ For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind ¹⁶ by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!

Appendix Two: Holocaust Narratives Referenced

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End Notes

ⁱ The New Testament passages deemed most offensive are listed in Appendix 1.

ⁱⁱ The spelling of the word has evolved as well. Sartre hyphenated/capitalized *anti-Semite*, and Griech-Polelle honors that spelling as late as 2020. Deborah Lipstadt, however, drops the hyphen and opts for *antisemitism*. I'm using that latest iteration.

ⁱⁱⁱ After the war, many “civilian soldiers” tasked with executing Jews gave testimonies similar to this one given by Walter Zimmermann: “In no case can I remember that anyone was forced to continue participating in the executions when he declared that he was no longer able to. As far as group and platoon actions were concerned, here I must honestly admit that with these smaller executions there were always some comrades who found it easier to shoot Jews than did others, so that the respective commando leaders never had difficulty finding suitable shooters.” Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Publishing, 1993), 128.

^{iv} The recent purchase of Twitter by “free-speech” advocate Elon Musk will have an impact on the ability of hate groups to trumpet the message of fear; Jews understandably view this new development with great concern.

^v In *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Harold Bloom gives an in-depth discussion of the soliloquy. He contends “that Shakespeare, by inventing what has become the most accepted mode for representing character and personality in language, thereby invented the human as we know it” (714). Obviously, at least another paper would be needed to explore the relation of the personal narrative to the literature of the Holocaust.