

Kenneth Burke and the Theory of Scapegoating

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Words sometimes play important roles in human history. I think, for example, of Martin Luther's use of the word *grace* to shatter Medieval Catholicism, or the use of *democracy* as a rallying cry for the American colonists in their split with England, or Karl Marx's vision of the *proletariat* as a class that would end all classes. More recently, *freedom* has been used as a mantra by those on the political left and the political right. If a president decides to go war, with the argument that *freedom* will be spread in the Middle East, then we are reminded once again of the power of words in shaping human actions. This is a notion upon which Kenneth Burke placed great stress as he painted a picture of human beings as word-intoxicated, symbol-using agents whose motives ought to be understood *logologically*, that is, from the perspective of our use and abuse of words.

In the following pages, I will argue that there is a key word that has the potential to make a large impact on human life in the future, the word *scapegoat*. This word is already in common use, of course, but I suggest that it is something akin to a ticking bomb in that it has untapped potential to change the way human beings think and act. This potential has two main aspects: 1) the ambiguity of the word as it is used in various contexts, and 2) the sense in which the word lies on the boundary between human self-consciousness and unself-consciousness. The first aspect is seen in the way the word *scapegoat* has been used with a positive connotation in theology ("Christ is the scapegoat who carries away sins") and with a negative connotation in other contexts ("X was made a scapegoat for the fall of Enron"). The second aspect refers to the phenomenon that scapegoating behavior may be occurring, but it could not be described as such by those who are behaving in that way. Hitler could not say to a crowd "We will use the Jews as

scapegoats upon whom we are venting our frustrations!” If the word scapegoat were used with that degree of self-consciousness, then the behavior would be rendered impossible. From this it follows that if greater awareness of the importance of the word could be fostered and spread throughout society, the effect may be a limitation of human impulses toward violence.

In this essay I will discuss these issues by providing some brief comments on the usage of the word scapegoat in modern English, noting the ambiguity referred to above. This will set the stage for an extended look at Kenneth Burke’s reflections on scapegoating, which offered a strong impetus to moving beyond simple usage of the word to a sophisticated philosophical analysis of the word as a key window into human behavior. Burke’s thoughts on scapegoating, however, remained a bit scattered and unfocused, even though he recognized that the cluster of concepts guilt / victimage / catharsis “is the very centre of man’s social motivation.”¹ That Burke’s reflections were powerful yet not fully developed leaves the door open for further refinement of the theory of scapegoating. Such refinement has been advanced already by René Girard, who was directly influenced by his reading of Burke, though he developed his own particular understanding of catharsis. In my conclusion I will attempt to continue developing the theory of the scapegoat by placing Burke in a rhetorical parlor along with Girard, Eric Voegelin, and Ernest Becker.

A. The Word Scapegoat

The English word scapegoat was coined by William Tyndale in his 1530 translation of Leviticus 16:8: “And Aaron cast lots over the two goats: one lot for the Lord, and another for a scapegoat” [spelling modernized]. The most common usage of “scapegoat” during the sixteenth through the

¹ Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965 [originally published in 1935], 285.

eighteenth centuries is seen in theological interpretations of Christ's death on the cross as a substitute for sinners. John Asgill's *The Metamorphosis of Man, by the Death and Resurrection of Christ from the Dead* (1727) is representative of this genre:

Man was freed from Sin before Christ was:

For the Moment that the Sin of Man was laid upon the head of that Scape-Goat, Man was legally discharged from it.

As soon as the Ram (Christ in a Figure) was caught in the Thicket, the whole Humanity (in the Type of Isaac) was let go.

And therefore, when Christ was taken, there was not a Man taken with him: *I am Jesus of Nazareth whom ye seek, let these therefore go their way.*

But the Sin of the whole Humanity, did from thence remain upon the Head of that Scape-Goat, (*He bare our Sins in his own Body upon the Tree*) till he had carried them out of the Sight of God and Man, by the Sacrifice of himself.²

The idea that Christ on the cross took upon himself the sins of humanity as a substitute recipient of God's wrath and punishment is the most widely known interpretation of the theological meaning of Christ's death. For many Christians, this interpretation is the central idea upon which all Christian doctrine turns; for some non- or ex-Christians, who reject this idea as primitive thinking, it is indeed the essential Christian idea, which is why Christianity must be abandoned. Both of these groups might be surprised to learn that there are other interpretations of the death of Christ that were articulated in the history of Christian theology, most notably the ransom theory and the moral influence theory, which frame the interpretation of the cross in terms that

² John Asgill, *The Metamorphosis of Man, by the Death and Resurrection of Christ from the Dead, Part I*. London, 1727. Based on information from English Short Title Catalogue. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale Group. p. 255.

do not rely on wrath and punishment at all. Nevertheless, theological texts such as Asgill's account for the bulk of the uses of the word scapegoat during the early modern period. At the same time, however, the second definition of the word was also present in various texts. This can be described as the *secular* usage, as seen in the following examples. From Bolingbroke's *Remarks on the History of England* (1780): "If the kingdom had escaped entire destruction in this forlorn condition, it must have been by miracle, and without any merit on the part of those, who govern'd; but this entire destruction would much more probably have follow'd, after a long series of calamities; without any other excuse on their part, than that of charging the catastrophe to the account of fortune, the common scapegoat of unskilful ministers."³ Thomas Davies' *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick* (1780) says this: "He had no inclination to become the scapegoat in this business; and he urged Mr. Garrick to perfect the articles of their agreement, by which it was covenanted, that neither of the contracting parties should accommodate matters with the patentee without a comprehension of the other."⁴ A character in Mrs. Hannah Cowley's play *A School for Greybeards* (1787) says: "Upon my word—so I must be the scapegoat! But I won't be blamed I vow . . ."⁵

James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* was a summarizing survey of the anthropological knowledge that had been compiled during the nineteenth century. His section on "The Scapegoat" was published in 1913. He referred to phenomena in a variety of cultures, times, and places, that were similar to the scapegoat ritual mentioned in Leviticus. In some cases, the sins

³ Henry St. John Bolingbroke, *Remarks on the History of England: By the Right Honourable Henry St. John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke*. London, [1780]. Based on information from English Short Title Catalogue. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale Group. 178.

⁴ Thomas Davies, *Memoirs of the Life of David Garrick, Esq. Interspersed with Characters and Anecdotes of His Theatrical Contemporaries*. Dublin, 1780. Based on information from English Short Title Catalogue. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale Group. Vol. 1, 60.

⁵ Hannah Cowley, *A School for Greybeards; Or, the Mourning Bride: A Comedy, in Five Acts*. Dublin, 1787. Based on information from English Short Title Catalogue. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale Group. 21.

and diseases of the community were symbolically placed on an animal, such as a dog, chicken, goat, or monkey, which was then driven away or killed. In other cases, the scapegoat was a human being. Frazer presents, to mention just one example, an account from the Yoruba people of Africa, who would choose one member of the community once a year to be paraded through the area, symbolically collecting the sins of the people. He is then ceremonially beheaded, which is “a signal for joy, thanksgiving, and for drum beating and dancing, as an expression of their gratification because their sacrifice has been accepted, the divine wrath is appeased, and the prospect of prosperity or increased prosperity assured.”⁶

Frazer’s overall framework suggested a trajectory of progress from the magical superstitions of “primitive” peoples, to reflective religions, to the advanced scientific and secular knowledge of the modern West. This perspective is summarized well in his own words:

The notion that we can transfer our guilt and sufferings to some other being who will bear them for us is familiar to the savage mind. It arises from a very obvious confusion between the physical and the mental, between the material and the immaterial. Because it is possible to shift a load of wood, stones, or what not, from our own back to the back of another, the savage fancies that it is equally possible to shift the burden of his pains and sorrows to another, who will suffer them in his stead. Upon this idea he acts, and the result is an endless number of very unamiable devices for palming off upon some one else the trouble which a man shrinks from bearing himself. In short, the principle of vicarious suffering is

⁶ Quoted in John B. Vickery and J’nan M. Sellery, eds., *The Scapegoat: Ritual and Literature* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 11.

commonly understood and practiced by races who stand on a low level of social and intellectual culture.⁷

Frazer's condescending attitude toward the past has not stood the test of time very well, due partially to the fact that the twentieth century witnessed the unleashing of massive episodes of war and violence, such as Nazism, Stalinism, and the American atomic bombs. The moral and psychological superiority of modern Westerners over their *primitive* ancestors is difficult to maintain as an unquestioned assumption in the wake of such events. A plausible argument can be made that "magical" thinking is just as much present today as it ever has been, even though it may be invisible to those who think that they have escaped magic.

It is worth noting that the two uses of the word, the biblical/theological usage and the secular application of it, are discordant. It is assumed that when human beings are turning other human beings (or "fortune") into scapegoats they are doing something wrong, something unjust and improper. Blame is being placed on one person so that others may avoid facing the reality of their guilt honestly. But the biblical/theological usage describes the placing of blame on Christ as a positive thing for humanity, as the transcendent means of redemption. So, when God engages in scapegoating, blaming the innocent and letting the guilty go free, it is a good thing, but when human beings engage in scapegoating, it is an evil action. This discordance is noted here and will be taken up again toward the end of this essay.

B. Kenneth Burke on the Scapegoat

The historical survey we have just completed paints the backdrop for a consideration of the contribution of Kenneth Burke to reflections on the scapegoat. It is my contention that Burke

⁷ Quoted in Vickery, ed., *The Scapegoat*, 3.

provided a very strong impetus toward the development of a more sophisticated understanding of the motives that drive scapegoating than had been articulated in the past. Burke deepens the discussion beyond the point to which Frazer brought it by asking the Why? question at a very deep level and providing us with thought-provoking answers.

Kenneth Burke's *Permanence and Change*, published in 1935, included a subsection on "The Scapegoat as an Error in Interpretation." He refers to the desperate economic conditions of poor whites in the South, drawing an analogy with a psychological experiment. The experiment had shown that if one repeatedly struck an iron bar to frighten an infant, while at the same time holding up a rabbit, then the infant would start to fear the image of the rabbit even when the bar was not present. Burke argues that the real cause of the suffering of poor whites was the economic structure of that time and place, but demagogues could easily suggest to them that the cause of their problems was black people: "the Negroes being the rabbit that is presented as the iron bar is violently struck, they take on the menacing quality of the bar. . . . the Poor Whites adopt intimidation by lynching as the adequate solution to their problem."⁸ For Burke, this is magical thinking and a case of "faulty means-selecting." His commentary in this section of *Permanence and Change* echoes Frazer's narratives in *The Golden Bough*. However, Burke warns against using the concept of scapegoating to designate "some special way of functioning not common to all men."⁹ Burke does not share Frazer's bias which sees modern, secular Westerners as qualitatively different from the *savages*. The trajectory of Burke's thought in the coming decades goes in the opposite direction, as it searches for the common structures underlying human behavior in all times and places. He will thus assume that if the *savages*

⁸ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965) [originally published in 1935], 15.

⁹ Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 15.

sought to transfer their guilt to another and send it away, then *moderns* will have a secularized way of doing the same thing. Burke believed that we cannot escape from the history we are studying as easily as Frazer seemed to think we could.

Permanence and Change also includes an appendix “On Human Behavior, Considered Dramatically.” Burke argues there that the cluster of concepts guilt / victimage / catharsis / redemption “is the very centre of man’s social motivation. And any scheme that shifts attention to other motivational areas is a costly error.”¹⁰ As a key example, he refers to the “Hitlerite emphasis” which puts “the stress upon a total cathartic *enemy* [the Jews] rather than upon the idea of a total cathartic *friend* [Christ].”¹¹

Burke’s analysis of Hitler was greatly expanded in his important review of *Mein Kampf*, published as “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” in *The Southern Review* in 1939.¹² This was a very substantive and insightful piece, comparable in philosophical quality to Eric Voegelin’s *Die Politischen Religionen* [political religions] (1938), which also analyzed Nazism as an ersatz political theology.¹³ Burke’s concern was not simply to warn about the danger posed by Hitler, but also to prevent a similar fascist movement from gaining momentum in the United States. (Charles Coughlin, a Catholic Priest who addressed large Depression-era audiences with fiery quasi-fascist rhetoric, is an illustration of the atmosphere within which Burke was communicating.)

¹⁰ Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 285.

¹¹ Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 288.

¹² This was an expanded version of a speech given by Burke at the Third American Writers’ Congress (1939). It was also collected in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941).

¹³ Voegelin fled for his life to the U.S. shortly afterwards. My attempts to find primary or secondary connections between Burke and Voegelin have led to very little, which is puzzling given the similarities between the two authors as major contributors to twentieth century philosophical anthropology. The recent English translation of this work is here: *Modernity Without Restraint: The Political Religions, The New Science of Politics and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, edited with an introduction by Manfred Henningsen. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000.

In “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” Burke emphasizes Hitler’s strategy for motivating his audience: present to it an enemy that is cunning, ruthless, seductive, poisoning, corrupting, plotting, etc. If the masses have an object to hate that is *perfectly* evil, then the energy of their forward movement will be as powerful as possible. To paint a picture of reality in shades of gray, with ambiguities and guilt everywhere, is to dissipate energy. Democracy, the parliamentary, is another form of dissipation attacked by Hitler. The babel of voices in society leads to endless debate and inaction. There must be one strong voice inspiring the populace, creating communal spirit through rhetoric.

Burke presents Hitler as being very sensitive to the suffering that resulted from the Great War and the Depression. He sought to be a *doctor* who would give the German people the medicine they need to become well again:

[a projection device is a] “curative” process that comes with the ability to hand over one’s ills to a scapegoat, thereby getting purification by dissociation. This was especially medicinal, since the sense of frustration leads to a self-questioning. Hence if one can hand over his infirmities to a vessel, or “cause,” outside the self, one can battle an external enemy instead of battling an enemy within. And the greater one’s internal inadequacies, the greater amount of evils one can load upon the back of “the enemy.”¹⁴

Burke places stress on Hitler as a kind of political theologian, a preacher who inverts the “hours of prayer” into “hours of vituperation.” Hitler presented himself as a Prophet leading the people into an experience of new birth. He was also the Great High Priest who presided over the sacrificial machinery of death that was necessary for new life to come to fruition. Burke

¹⁴ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), 202–03.

concludes the essay by arguing that Hitler's main appeal was based on "a bastardization of fundamentally religious patterns of thought."¹⁵

During the next decade, with its momentous events, Burke wrote and published *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950). In these two large books he continued to develop his understanding of scapegoating as a vital element of social formation. *A Grammar of Motives* contains a section on "The Dialectic of the Scapegoat." Burke articulates three key aspects of the *scapegoat mechanism*:

(1) an original state of merger, in that the iniquities are shared by both the iniquitous and their chosen vessel; (2) a principle of division, in that the elements shared in common are being ritualistically alienated; (3) a new principle of merger, this time in the unification of those whose purified identity is defined in dialectical opposition to the sacrificial offering.¹⁶

Burke also points out in this section that the motivating impulse of violence is ambiguous in that it can be outwardly or inwardly directed. If it is possible to attack the scapegoat as an external object, then there is homicidal action; if such attack becomes frustrated, the violence can turn inward and become suicidal. Examples of this are seen in Germany's prolongation of World War II, even when it was clear that victory for them was impossible; the same was the case in Japan, and the image of a Japanese general committing ritual suicide as the allies close in is a perfect summarizing anecdote. If Burke were here today, he would no doubt have much to say about the merger of the homicidal and the suicidal motives in the 9/11 attacks.

The subsection on the scapegoat in the *Grammar* is important, but it is very short; the main substance of Burke's theory of scapegoating needs to be pulled together from other

¹⁵ Kenneth Burke, *Terms for Order* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 118.

¹⁶ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives and a Rhetoric of Motives* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1962), 406.

passages in the *Grammar*, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, and other essays.

This has been done in a helpful way by William Rueckert in Chapter 4 of *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* and by Allen Carter in *Kenneth Burke and the Scapegoat Process*.

The next several pages present a summary of their summaries. It needs to be noted however, that these summaries are in some ways easier to follow than Burke's writing itself. Burke's thoughts on scapegoating were scattered about in many different places in his writings. Though he acknowledged the centrality and immense importance of scapegoating, he could not quite manage to write an essay on the topic that was both theoretically comprehensive and focused.

For Burke, the meaning of a word is not isolated. One cannot simply look up a dictionary definition of *scapegoat*, for example, and then be satisfied that one understands it. A word needs to be seen as part of a cluster or complex of terms, such as the negative, guilt, scapegoat, redemption, which is itself part of a larger philosophical interpretation of the human scene. In a cluster of terms, any one of them *logologically* implies all the others.¹⁷ When this concept is grasped, then one is able to travel further down the road toward understanding than one could travel with the dictionary alone.

For Burke, there are seven key interlocked moments in the human drama: the negative, guilt, hierarchy, mortification, victimage, catharsis, redemption. By *the negative* Burke means the moral prohibitions that are necessary to civilization: Thou shalt not lie, steal, kill, etc. This is one of the key elements of Burke's "definition of man" as a mark that distinguishes human beings from the lower animals.¹⁸ The lower animals simply are what they are and do what they

¹⁷ This point is expanded in Burke's *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

¹⁸ "Man is: the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal, inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative), separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order), and rotten with perfection." "Definition of Man," *The Hudson Review* 16, no. 4 (1963-64): 507. Reprinted in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 16.

do; they are *positive*. But human beings can say No to each other and to themselves internally.

Allen Carter gives a helpful anecdotal illustration of this point:

I was in my backyard . . . from the other side of the fence came my neighbor's voice. Unaware of my presence, he was authoritatively laying down the law of his own turf to a visiting child: what to touch, what not to touch, where to go, where not to go, and so on. A few minutes later I caught myself telling my son not to kick his soccer ball onto Bermuda grass I had just watered. As I walked around the house, I heard my wife tell other children not to throw sand on the sidewalk she had just swept. . . . *When we are initiated into language we are initiated into a system of commandments.*¹⁹

These are obviously mundane examples, but the nexus of commands and prohibitions within which all human beings are socialized in their various cultures cover all aspects of life, big and small. Because no one could ever perfectly internalize and obey all of these commandments, all human beings will feel guilt. We will all, at times, say things and do things that we shouldn't, causing harm to ourselves and others. We carry these feelings of failure and guilt inside of us, and we will seek some way to cleanse ourselves of those feelings.

But before I get to catharsis, I need to mention the concept of hierarchy. Every society will be constituted by a complex system of hierarchies.²⁰ Parents have authority over children, teachers instruct pupils, government officials enact laws that citizens must obey, religious leaders formulate doctrines that the faithful are expected to adhere to, the leaders of corporations give orders to the layers of their underlings, the rich employ the poor as servants, and so on. Society is

¹⁹ C. Allen Carter, *Kenneth Burke and the Scapegoat Process* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 56–7.

²⁰ See William H. Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 131–34.

stratified in many ways, and in some cases this becomes what Burke calls a *hierarchical psychosis*, such as the doctrine of White Supremacy. But even in relatively benign circumstances, the reality of hierarchical structures produces myriad forms of social divisions, frictions, resentments, and guilt feelings. The ideal of equal concern and affection of all human beings for all other human beings is a distant dream for fallen creatures who are entangled in complicated webs of hierarchy that were formed years, decades, or centuries before they were born. The spirit of hierarchy that shapes us thus produces its own set of guilt feelings regardless of where one finds oneself: “King and peasant are ‘mysteries’ to each other. Those ‘Up’ are guilty of not being ‘Down,’ those ‘Down’ are certainly guilty of not being ‘Up.’”²¹

Mortification and victimage are the twin concepts that must be considered next. For Burke, the negative—the system of commands and prohibitions that makes civilization possible—is the bedrock of human psychology. When the force of the negative is primarily turned inwards, the result is mortification. In traditional language, this is asceticism and self-denial, which can take many different forms. Victimage occurs when the force of the negative is primarily turned outwards, as accusatory language directed toward other human beings. Others are vilified, demonized, condemned, and so forth, as a *projective* means of avoiding introspection and self-awareness. The extreme form of mortification is suicide; the extreme form of victimage is homicide. In Rueckert’s words, “to make others suffer for our own sins is victimage; to make ourselves suffer for our own sins is mortification.”²²

For Burke, catharsis is one of the most important themes in literature and life. Human beings have a desire to be happy, but the burden of guilt that they carry within themselves is always working against happiness. There is thus a strong desire to be rid of the internal sense of

²¹ Burke, “Definition of Man,” *The Hudson Review* 16, no. 4 (1963-64): 506.

²² Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*, 147.

guilt, pollution, pain, anxiety, and so forth. These hindering, debilitating emotions can be projected, mentally, onto an Other and sent away when that Other is expelled. This is the twentieth century psychological language that expresses the central concept of Leviticus 16. In Burke's words:

The principle of drama is implicit in the idea of action, and the principle of victimage is implicit in the nature of drama. The negative helps radically to define the elements to be victimized. And inasmuch as substitution is a prime resource of symbol-systems, the conditions are set for catharsis by scapegoat (including the "natural" invitation to "project" upon the enemy any troublesome traits of our own that we would negate.) And the unresolved problems of "pride" that are intrinsic to privilege also bring the motive of hierarchy to bear here; for many kinds of guilt, resentment, and fear tend to cluster about the hierarchical psychosis, with its corresponding search for a sacrificial principle such as can become embodied in a political scapegoat.²³

Catharsis through victimage makes possible a renewed sense of unity in the community of agents who are purifying themselves, and a renewed sense of personal happiness and peace. I think here of the chilling photographs of Nazis smiling and laughing in the midst of their work while nooses are hanging in the background or smoke is rising from chimneys.

Redemption is the last of the seven interlocked terms we have been considering.²⁴ This is the end product of the dramatic action of human culture. In the wake of the cathartic expulsion of guilt, evil, and decay, a social scene can be created that embodies the fellowship of the Good, the Righteous, the Victors, the People of God. This group defines itself over against the Other that

²³ Burke, "Definition of Man," *The Hudson Review* 16, no. 4 (1963-64): 510.

²⁴ See Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*, 131-34.

represents evil, degradation, and guilt. That Hitler presented himself as a redeemer figure in this sense is clear, as Burke argues in “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle.” But it is not just the obviously pathological characters who fit this description. Any political leader in any time and place will use rhetorical resources to articulate a vision of “redemption,” “hope,” “a new day for our nation,” and so forth, with the goal of creating a more unified community in which the members of society will feel at peace with themselves as participants in a broader enterprise of human endeavor.

The overtly religious language used by Burke does not signify that he writes as a theologian or is promoting religion. It indicates that he believes that religion is not a private matter. Rather, culture is inherently religious and religion is inherently cultural. Burke, particularly toward the end of his writing career, sought to present a kind of secularized Christianity as a lens through which the human condition can and ought to be understood.²⁵

Allen Carter helpfully summarizes Burke’s complex understanding of the concept of scapegoating through three key metaphors: the rod, the ladder, and the skull.²⁶ *The rod* points to the sense of threat that attends not living within the boundaries laid out by the negative. If you disobey, you will suffer the consequences: If you break the law, you will be thrown in jail; if you slack off on the job, you will be fired; if you preach heresy, you will be excommunicated; if you make the wrong choice, you will regret it for the rest of your life. *The ladder* points to the hierarchical structures referred to above. Those structures create boundaries that can produce a sense of guilt if they are not maintained. Human beings also have a strong tendency to think of themselves as above other human beings who are shamefully below. *The skull* points to human mortality. Human beings realize, at least if they are being honest with themselves, that they are

²⁵ Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*, 127.

²⁶ Carter, *Kenneth Burke and the Scapegoat Process*, 3–27.

ephemeral and limited. The question of the meaning and ultimate purpose of life impacts people existentially and leads them to imagine what lies beyond the grave. Many aspects of human psychology can be interpreted along these lines as a struggle to understand one's life in the face of death.

In this section of the essay I have provided an overview summary of Burke's theory of the scapegoat. This is a very substantive theory that sought to integrate insights from literature, religion, and the social sciences to articulate an understanding of cultural dynamics. This was not an armchair exercise for Burke. He sought to address the catastrophic devastation of World War II. He was hoping that the writing of books and articles that increase human self-understanding could somehow mitigate human destructiveness. He saw clearly that one key distinguishing mark of human beings in relation to the lower animals is our ability to completely destroy ourselves and all of nature. If there is to be any possibility of "making the world a better place" through rhetoric, it would only be found when those who employ rhetoric to build a community do so with anthropological understanding.

C. Post-Burke Reflections on Scapegoating

I turn now to consider a select group of authors whose reflections on violence can be placed together with Burke's in a rhetorical parlor: Eric Voegelin, Ernest Becker, and René Girard. Voegelin (1901-1985) was a political philosopher who wrote extensively on history, religion, and politics. He articulated a subtle theory of consciousness that grew out of his understanding of the key dimensions of reality as it is experienced by human beings:

God and man, world and society form a primordial community of being. The community with its quaternarian structure is, and is not, a datum of human

experience. It is a datum of experience in so far as it is known to man by virtue of his participation in the mystery of its being. It is not a datum of experience in so far as it is not given in the manner of an object of the external world but is knowable only from the perspective of participation in it.²⁷

What he calls *world* in this passage he calls *nature* elsewhere. He is painting a picture of a vertical axis comprising God (transcendence) and nature (immanence), which is intersected by a horizontal plane of human sociality. *Man*, can also be called the self, the person, the individual, who is the locus of experience of the dimensions. This picture of reality is not unique to Voegelin; many other authors say similar things, including Kenneth Burke, who speaks of “four realms to which words may refer”: the natural, the socio-political, the logological (words about words), and the supernatural.²⁸ This corresponds well with Voegelin’s scheme, with the caveat that Burke’s analysis of humans as symbol using animals (logology) is similar to but not identical with Voegelin’s analysis of the person’s (man’s) consciousness. (I have not found evidence that Voegelin read anything by Burke, or vice versa, but this makes the parallels between them more rather than less interesting, in my view.)

Voegelin’s take on human violence and scapegoating arises out of his dimensional anthropology. For Voegelin, the ideal of human consciousness is balance and complexity. The mature person is one who is comfortable living in the middle of the vertical axis *in between* God and nature, with ethical concern for other human beings in society, and with an openness to psychological growth as a person on a journey through time. Unbalanced living is seen in the Gnostic who seeks to flee to a spiritual realm above nature. The opposite error is committed by a

²⁷ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume 1: Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 39.

²⁸ Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 14–15.

devotee of materialistic scientism who rejects the spiritual realm as illusory and claims that nature is all that is real. In the socio-political realm, the horizontal plane, pathological characters may become demagogic leaders who claim that the group is the highest value, in relation to which the individual is expendable. When rejection of the divine and the traditional structures of ethics is asserted by such leaders, the doorway is opened to mass killings that have as their goal the radical reshaping of reality in accordance with the dreams of the unbalanced leaders. The ancient Gnostic's flight from reality is transformed into the modern Gnostic's quest to reshape reality in his own narrow image.²⁹ Spiritual pathology and the political violence that it entails arise out of a refusal to live within the complexity of reality in a balanced way.

Ernest Becker (1924–74) was a cultural anthropologist and philosopher whose writings paid a great deal of attention to human violence. His last two books, *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil*, present an explanation of human behavior that focuses on fear of physical death. He claims that human beings commit acts of scapegoating because they believe that they can somehow, magically, transfer their mortality to others and kill that mortality by killing the others. The key to the puzzle of human behavior is “killing others in order to affirm our own life.”³⁰ In the terms of Allen Carter's presentation of Burke, this is a version of *the skull* as a motive. Becker makes positive references to Burke, indicating that he is working in agreement with Burke's general argument. For example: “Burke was led to the central idea of victimage and redemption through Greek tragedy and Christianity; he saw that this fundamentally religious notion is a basic characteristic of any social order. Again we are brought back to our initial point that all culture is in essence sacred—*supernatural*.”³¹ However, Becker's reduction of all human

²⁹ A helpful summary of Voegelin along these lines is provided by Glenn Hughes in his chapter in *The Politics of the Soul: Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience*.

³⁰ Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: Free Press, 1975), 110.

³¹ Becker, *Escape from Evil*, 115.

motives to one—fear of death—seems to indicate that Burke’s attempt to introduce complexity into our understanding of human motives did not register well with Becker, who sought a simpler interpretation. It is the case that human awareness of mortality is an important factor in our psychology, but there are other factors not emphasized or even mentioned by Becker that are also important. In terms of Voegelin’s analysis, Becker is combining the natural dimension (finitude) with the individual self’s ability to envision its future. But the social plane as a motivating force does not come into focus for Becker in the way it does for the next author I will consider, Girard.

In my view, René Girard (1923–2015) is the most substantive and influential voice working in the direct wake of Burke’s reflections on scapegoating. Like Burke, Girard’s thought centers on the fertile interface between literature and social science. From his reading of literature, particularly Shakespeare, Cervantes, Flaubert, Stendahl, and Dostoevsky, Girard articulated the theme of *mimetic desire*, which means that human beings copy the desires of others. Contrary to the modern myth of the autonomous self whose desires arise spontaneously from within, Girard suggests that the great writers reveal through their characters that human desires are most commonly shaped and directed by social contexts. We desire something, such as gold or an attractive potential mate, because we see others desiring that thing. But this is a recipe for conflict because if person A is copying the desire of person B for the possession of object C, then A and B will by definition become rivals to each other who are fighting for that thing. This behavior is easily observable in small children, but it is not a phase that human beings grow out of as they get older. The patterns of mimetic desire, rivalry, and conflict simply become much more sophisticated and convoluted. Girard argues that because mimetic desire is the basic structure of human psychology, we fall into a chaotic war of all against all. This situation can

only be resolved through the *scapegoat mechanism*, a phrase he copies directly from Burke.³² A society can focus its chaotic violence in a particular direction, toward a scapegoat, as a way of cathartically releasing its conflict and generating a new sense of unanimity and peace.

According to Allen Carter, “the Burkean self has neither firm foundation nor substance. A product of the verbal swirl, it is as insubstantial as a fading syllable, always already undergoing transformations made possible by the symbolic resources of language.”³³ This concept parallels well Girard’s idea that there is no autonomous self that precedes social relations. What we call selves are more like ghosts blown here and there by social winds of mimetic desire. But there is a key difference between Girard and Burke, which is articulated well by Carter:

For Burke, what comes first is the system of commandments that proliferates and defines greater criminality. The language, being ethically charged, guides the behavior of its speakers but, perfecting its moral demands, induces in them guilt and the need for a surrogate victim. For Girard, all hands tend to mimic each other’s reach for the same object, which leads to trouble and, in the end, to the establishment of the legal code. For Burke, legally induced guilt creates needs for self-justification that make it difficult for any reaching hand to consider compromise and withdrawal. For Girard, the scapegoat precedes the law. For Burke, the law precedes the scapegoat. Who is to say which should be privileged over the other? I am trying to suggest their doctrines are mutually reinforcing.³⁴

³² Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 14–17. “As for the scapegoat mechanism in its purest form, the use of a sacrificial receptacle for the ritual unburdening of one’s sins, here also we can avoid the hypothetical introduction of a separate mental process,” 16.

³³ Carter, “Logology and Religion: Kenneth Burke on the Metalinguistic Dimension of Language,” *Journal of Religion* 72 (January 1992): 16.

³⁴ Carter, “Logology and Religion,” 15.

This point could also be expressed through Burke's notion that in a cluster of terms the concepts mutually imply each other. It is not necessary, in other words, to ask whether the chicken came before the egg or vice versa.

At places in his books, Girard's thought takes a distinct turn in a theological direction, though he always says that he is not a theologian but an anthropologist. Girard claims that we are able to develop such a clear, conscious analysis of scapegoating precisely because of the biblical narratives. From the story of Cain and Abel to the account of Joseph unjustly imprisoned to the words of the Prophets to the passion accounts of the murder of Jesus, the Bible claims that truth is on the side of the victim, not on the side of the victimizers. This turns upside down the story that is always told by the scapegoaters, who justify their violence in their own eyes. The scapegoaters always claim that the one being killed is a guilty criminal who deserves to be punished. Girard argues that even though there are passages in the Bible that describe God in violent terms, the main trajectory of thought in the Bible points in the opposite direction. God is being progressively revealed as nonviolent, as peace and love.

D. Synthesis

We can combine the insights of these authors along these lines. The various dimensions of reality (God, nature, self, society) are regions within which human motives become focused.³⁵ They are "sovereignties" in the sense in which that term has been used recently by Jean Elshtain in her book *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self*.³⁶ Because human beings tend to *fall* into more simplistic

³⁵ Burke's comments on the structure of his "motivorum trilogy" are relevant here. Grammar relates to the vertical axis of ontology, substance; Rhetoric relates to the horizontal plane of community formation, Symbolic relates to the individual's identity. See "Identification and Consubstantiality" in *A Grammar of Motives and a Rhetoric of Motives*, 545–47. See also his section on "Order, the Secret, and the Kill" in *A Grammar of Motives and a Rhetoric of Motives*, 784–91. Order is "the ladder, cosmologized by the middle ages in what Lovejoy calls 'the Great Chain of Being.'" The Secret relates to the individual and the Symbolic. The Kill is social scapegoating.(789)

³⁶ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

forms of thinking, rather than living with complexity, this means that patterns of scapegoating will develop that arise out of narrowly focused motives. 1) Those who see themselves as asserting God's sovereignty will act as judges of sinful humanity. This will take the form of an Inquisition, a Crusade, an attack by Muslim terrorists, or the bombing of an abortion clinic by a Christian fundamentalist. 2) Those who focus their motives primarily on the horizontal plane of culture and the state will reinforce their social unanimity through acts of scapegoating against an identified minority. The Hitlerite attack on the Jews, the Stalinist attack on counter-revolutionaries, the lynching of blacks in the deep South, the massacre of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda, are examples of this. In the cases of Hitler and white supremacy, a vertical language of higher and lower races adds a naturalistic component to the rhetoric of horizontal scapegoating. In the Marx-influenced thought-world time predominates over essence, as the scapegoaters identify themselves with the ideal future and their victims with the corrupt past. 3) Those who see themselves as asserting the sovereignty of the self will seek to argue that the agent must be able to act in accordance with his or her purposes without any scenic interference. Individual autonomy must trump any laws which would restrict the self's freedom of choice. This passage from Burke illuminates this situation:

[in the wake of Rousseau] we got a different notion of the individual: not the individual as an *integral* part of the popular whole, but the individual as a *divisive* part of the popular whole.

Unheralded, even unnoticed, another "fall" had taken place. And instead of the individual as microcosmic replica of the popular macrocosm, we got the individual *against* the group.³⁷

³⁷ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 364.

This picture we have just painted of the narrowing and fragmentation of human motives suggests the image of various limbs of a tree that can be climbed out on. One person climbs up vertically to be one with God's will; another person stresses group belonging as the highest priority; another claims that isolated selfhood trumps all else; another may seek to defend nature by joining an eco-terrorist cell. What is being evaded in all cases is the challenge of living in the center, the task of living at the intersection of the dimensions of reality in a way that holds them together in creative tension. When people climb out on a limb they are enacting the principle of *division, alienation*; as such they are inevitably going to see themselves as surrounded by *enemies* who have climbed out on other limbs. At that point, there is a strong likelihood that some form of war or scapegoating will occur. The specific forms of scapegoating may vary significantly from scene to scene, but the underlying dynamic will remain the same. Human conflict arises from our refusal to live in the center.

Put differently, human conflict arises from our refusal to become self-conscious. Scapegoating is the act of blaming others as a way of not facing clearly and honestly one's own guilt. Scapegoating is a flight from self-awareness. Thus when Jesus says on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," he is bringing into articulation what Girard calls the *persecutory unconscious*. He says that in "this passage we are given the first definition of the unconscious in human history."³⁸ Those who are violent are not fully aware of what they are doing, and the violence has as its goal the maintenance of that unawareness. Thus, when thinkers such as those I have been considering pull back the veil to expose scapegoating they are working against the grain of human psychological sloth; they are working with the grain of authentic human maturity.

³⁸ Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 111.

This statement summarizes Burke, Voegelin, Becker, and Girard, viewed synoptically. But we may also note a commonality between them in that they are all anthropological thinkers who are standing outside the fence of theology and looking in, commenting on what they see as the religious heart of human culture. By theology I mean the rhetoric of religion as it would be articulated by the preacher or the prophet who speaks from within the experience of faith, as opposed to the scholar who comments on it from without. Of the writing of books and articles by scholars there will surely be no end, as they continually comment on each other's books and articles. The knowledge that is articulated in this way is sometimes very valuable. But if we ask how the human race is actually going to change, so that we "study war no more," I suggest that that possibility is only plausible if there are religious leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr., who speak from within the experience of faith in a manner that constitutes a *public theology*. Scholars usually just communicate with other scholars and with students, but a religious leader, such as MLK or Gandhi, may be able to communicate with millions of people, speaking with a voice that draws from deep wells of religious tradition and political ideals.

I noted earlier the odd discordance in the two main uses of the concept of the scapegoat. When God scapegoats, it is good, but when human beings scapegoat, it is evil. Girard's thought wrestles deeply with this precise dilemma, which lies at the heart of Christianity as a theological system. Burke's contribution to this topic can be seen as an updated version of a projective psychological account of the origins of the idea of God. In other words, if human beings are symbol using and misusing animals, then there is a certain rationality to the act of inventing a God who employs scapegoating. By inventing such a God and worshipping and *obeying* him, human beings can claim that when they engage in victimage they are following God's lead and walking in the path of righteousness. If divine violence and wrath poured out on a victim is

redemptive, then human wrath can also under the right circumstances be a microcosmic reflection of God's will and character. Burke's argument shows how this circular, self-reinforcing train of thought has its own rationality. But the other usage of the word scapegoat, which presumes the wrongness and inauthenticity of scapegoating, always seems to hang in the air as a sign of contradiction giving human beings an uneasy conscience. It is my suggestion that this other, so called *secular*, meaning of the word scapegoat has the potential to revolutionize theological worldviews by forcing us to consider what the world would look like if God was not in any sense involved in scapegoating. If a wrathful, scapegoating God who commands violence and enacts violence comes to be understood as a human invention, as a projection, then space is cleared for what Burke would call a *transubstantiation* of God.³⁹ The essence or substance of God could begin to be imagined as peaceful and loving. Or, in terms that would suit orthodox theology more comfortably, human beings could cease inventing or imagining God and allow their self-awareness to be impacted by a genuine revelation, a new theophany. "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (I John 1:5). The only sort of public theology that would be able to provide a decisive change in direction for humanity is one that decisively raised human self-consciousness to the awareness that there is no legitimate abuse of scapegoats, by either divine or human agents.

³⁹ Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 320.