Title: “Religion in the Shadow of the Shoah: Exploring the Social Dimensions of Religion”

Abstract

The prevailing narrative of Hitler’s regime concerning religion is that it was anti-Christian and that Christianity was a persecuted religion. However, recent studies complicate this narrative by revealing the role that Christianity played in legitimating the Nazi regime. This project explores the ways that Christians drew upon a history of anti-Semitic narratives in Germany that shaped their racial ideology. Contrary to the accepted story, many Christians were complacent and obedient to the Nazi regime because of the cultural heritage bequeathed to them by their religion. This raises a crucial question: what kind of religion, in this case Christianity, is capable of resisting the appeal to national and racial identity exploited by the Nazis? By examining the relationship between culture and religion and using Nazi Germany as a case study, I will examine what qualities are needed in a religion to resist genocide and appeals to eradicate the Other.

Personal Statement

I was raised Christian and attended church weekly and because my father is a music minister, I spent much of my free time in church. For as long as I can remember I have been fascinated by religion and was encouraged by my parents to ask questions and explore my faith. My approach to religion changed in the classroom at Elon. Suddenly my personal interest in theology and world religions became something I could study in the classroom academically. In my “Religion in a Global Context” class freshman year, I learned about many religions, analyzed religious texts, and started to think about what research I desired to pursue. I realized that my
interests in religion no longer had to be purely personal; they could be explored in classrooms and talked about with my peers. For my final research paper in that class, I chose to look at the difference in how conservative and progressive Christians respond to biblical criticism. This paper was the spark in my interest in how religions deal with difference and what ultimately led me to my project.

At the end of “Religion in a Global Context”, I was intrigued enough to declare a minor in Religious Studies and signed up for Introduction to New Testament and Early Christianity. I learned about the same texts I had read growing up, but was able to view them more completely by gaining an understanding of their socio-historical context. I was intrigued by how early Christians constructed their identity and the way they dealt with rising conflict between Jews and Gentiles. When I started reading ahead for class and doing research on my own, I knew I was hooked. I declared a major in Religious Studies and joined the Elon College Fellows program so I could dig even deeper.

This major feeds both my spirit and my mind. In the classroom and in my research, I am able to learn about the ideas that have fascinated me for years. I am also able to add more depth and meaning to my personal beliefs, making my journey in Religious Studies a holistic scholarly experience. In my methods course, I learned about all the ways that religion as a human phenomenon is studied. My fascination with how religion orders people’s lives and constructs their identity from a sociological perspective grew as I was exposed to different methodologies. I began to look at the issue of slavery and how Christian theologians used religion to support arguments both for and against slavery. What elements of Christianity allow for both arguments to be made with support from the same scripture? Are there interpretations that can ensure the Bible and other sacred texts are used for good and not evil? In talking with Dr. Jeffrey Pugh, the
same question came up with regards to Nazi Germany. Christians’ failure to deal with religious
difference with Jews made them complicit in the horror of the Holocaust. My former questions
about negotiating difference shifted to a more meaningful and relevant question of what kind of
religion is needed to resist mass atrocities like the Holocaust. This project comes from my
struggle with how religions deal with difference but I am inspired more by what religions need to
build a community of diversity rather than seek to destroy it. For this project, the Holocaust will
be my case study, but in my graduate studies and beyond I plan to look at other instances of
genocide and war to make larger conclusions about how to prevent religions from becoming bad.

**Project Description**

**Focus:**

There is a prevailing narrative that German Nazism was anti-Christian and that Germans
only followed Hitler because they were seduced and manipulated by his skillful rhetoric.

However, the relationship between Christianity and Nazism was far more nuanced than is often
portrayed, showing various levels of support from Hitler himself down to rank and file church
members\(^1\). Hitler and other Nazi leaders used religious language in combination with the history
of Christian anti-Semitism to legitimate their authority to the public. Specifically, the idea of
Providence, that all things happen according to God’s will, formed a legitimating force for
political coercion\(^2\). By recognizing the power religion has to socially construct worldviews\(^3\), the

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\(^1\) Richard Steigmann-Gall in his book, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* details this
complex relationship with thorough evidence and reveals the strong Christian influence on Nazi ideology and the
enthusiasm that some Christians showed for National Socialism and many Nazis’ self-identified status as Christians.

\(^2\) Rainer Bucher, in his book, *Hitler’s Theology*, describes this idea of Providence and gives multiple examples
where Hitler used it in public speeches and writings to explain that his political project (German world-domination,
杀戮 Jews, eugenics, etc.) was legitimate because it was what God ordered for the world.

\(^3\) *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* serves as the foundation for this method.
scholarly focus shifts from an individualist, Hitler-centered study of the Holocaust, to a broader analysis of how German society understood themselves as a united and pure people. More research is needed to draw conclusions about what makes a religion complacent or resistant in the face of political manipulation or propaganda, and social pressures. Social construction theory guides my project for deeper insight into German Christian culture. Using this sociological method, combined with a theological examination of the ways in which anti-Semitism informed German Christianity (for example, through the use of Martin Luther as a national hero) I will examine what elements of Christianity supported the National Socialists and identify the key elements of religion that fail to protect communities against corruption and prejudice.

In Hitler’s Germany, 61% of people were Protestant and 32% were Catholic, showing how the Reformation still impacted German society. The country lacked the unity, national confidence and governmental stability to adequately negotiate the Weimar Republic. This fragmentation was advantageous to Hitler as he utilized a distinct rhetoric to construct his political platform. But the political promises Hitler made were also combined with religious rhetoric. This is shocking for many contemporary Christians. Knowing that Hitler believed that killing Jews was what Providence demanded makes the importance of critiquing religion more pressing in the contemporary world.

As important as identifying the elements of Catholicism and Protestantism that failed in resisting Hitler is the more important question: was there an approach to religion that caused some to resist? My initial findings say the story is mixed, but by studying those who did manage

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4 The Godesberg Declaration, formulated in 1939 by church leaders, “stated that National Socialism carried forwards the work of Martin Luther and would lead the German people to a true understanding of Christian faith” as “the unbridgeable religious opposition to Judaism”. See Susannah Heschel’s chapter, “When Jesus Was an Aryan” in Betrayal.

some resistance, particularly on behalf of Jews, rather than national or institutional survival, I hope to find answers to my questions about how religion hurts or heals.

Religion provides a set of values and a moral code for human existence, yet many unjust acts are carried out in its name. This project seeks to take contemporary scholarship one step beyond the questions of why Christians followed Hitler to explore and define ways in which religion can be used as a tool for critique instead of legitimating genocide. Ultimately, I hope to define what characteristics of religion are helpful to humankind as a whole and thus can prevent mass atrocities like genocide. This project uses Germany Christianity and the Holocaust as a case study, but will provide answers applicable to religiously fueled atrocities evoked in the name of God throughout the world.

**Proposed Experiences:**

Over the next two years, I will use reading, German language study, study abroad in Germany, conferences and classes to conduct my research and develop my final products. This semester in “Theologians Under Hitler” with Dr. Pugh, I am developing my research foundation through reading and class lectures about Christian responses to the Holocaust and am refining my research questions by thinking more carefully about social theory and the use of religion as a legitimating force in culture. I am also taking “Christianity and Social Justice” which examines the ways Christians have both contributed to and worked against social injustices. Through our service work it allows me to reflect on what Christians engaged in social witness emphasize and how they interpret the Bible to support their cause.

This summer, I plan to continue my literature review and expand my knowledge base through reading books, articles, and other online resources from the National Holocaust Museum
and their Committee on Church Relations and the Holocaust. I will also enroll in Intermediate German language study at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill to expedite my language study. In July, I will use Lumen funds to attend a four-day symposium on the Holocaust at Appalachian State University. This will involve education on the Holocaust and discussion with teachers, students, and community members about intolerance and genocide in the contemporary world. My literature review will continue into the fall in my 499 research hours with Dr. Pugh. My German language study will continue in GER221 to prepare me for the placement exam required for study at Heidelberg University. I will also take HIS339: History of the Holocaust. Next winter term, I will go on the Holocaust Journey to experience the most important places of the Holocaust and experience German culture first-hand.

In the spring of 2013, I will study at the University of Heidelberg to do research and take classes in the country I am studying. I hope to work closely with a new generation of German professors who are more critical in assessing Germany’s role in the Holocaust in order to gain a different perspective on how religion shaped Nazi Germany’s worldview. I hope to research primary sources in German libraries and archives, examining sermons and theological writings from the time period. In the Summer of 2013 I plan to intern at the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. in their Committee on Conscience division which works for genocide prevention and research. The museum creates internships in alignment with students’ interests. As most internships are unpaid, I will use Lumen funds for living expenses during this time.

In the fall of my senior year, I will compile my research from my time at Elon, abroad, and in Washington as well as information from related courses into a formal research paper. I will also develop a presentation to be given at church forums and conferences. These two presentations will be similar but each will be addressed for the specific audience. During the
winter I will submit my abstract to SURF, NCUR, and other conferences to present in the spring and will make plans to present my research to the larger Elon community.

**Proposed Products:**

The primary products for this project include a scholarly publication and presentation, as well as potential curriculum materials for use in churches and community groups. The article will be submitted to undergraduate research journals and will be presented at academic conferences. This will allow me to present my project to the scholarly community at both general undergraduate research forums like SURF and NCUR as well as the regional conference for the American Academy of Religion (AAR).

In addition to my presentation for scholars, I plan to share my project findings with religious communities via church settings by writing, publishing and distributing curriculum for adult church forums. The curriculum would be based on my research discoveries and would provide a template for discussing the relationship between religion and culture and Christians’ roles in constructing society. This project serves to provide answers to religious groups about what they can learn from the Holocaust about resisting ethnocentrism and how to use religion to promote acceptance and diversity.

In my last semester at Elon, my mentor and I will explore ways to collaborate with the Truitt Center or the new Multi-Faith Center to discuss the implications of my research with Elon as a whole. In keeping with Elon’s commitment to interfaith cooperation, we hope to spark campus-wide dialogue on religious difference and the roles religions can play in creating diverse and respectful communities. I also hope to present my findings and facilitate a discussion at a gathering of the different religious organizations on campus.
Feasibility

The feasibility of this project is explained through the above narrative and information below.

Budget:

- Holocaust Journey Winter Term- $5,000
- Semester Study Abroad - $5,000
  - Round trip airfare to Germany- $1,500
  - Internal travel (visiting museums, libraries, etc.)- $1,000
  - Room and board- $2,500
- Books- $800
- Conferences- $955
  - Summer Symposium at Appalachian State University: $250
  - NCUR: $405
    - Registration Fee: $185
    - Rooming: $220
  - SECSOR (AAR): $300
    - Registration Fee: $80
    - Rooming: $220
- German Summer Course at UNC- $630
- Internship at Holocaust Museum
  - Housing in Washington D.C.- $2,000
  - Gas to, from and within D.C.- $100
  - Food for 10 weeks- $500
- Unforeseen costs- $15

Timeline:

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<tr>
<th>Proposed Experiences</th>
<th>Proposed Product(s)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Summer 2012</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>German Summer Course at UNC</td>
<td>Better understanding of German language</td>
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<td>Continued Reading</td>
<td>Beginnings of literature review</td>
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<td>Symposium at Appalachian State University</td>
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<td><strong>Fall 2012</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>GER221</td>
<td>Literature Review</td>
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<td>REL499 (2 credit hours)</td>
<td>Gain an understanding of the Holocaust as a whole</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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<td>Winter 2013</td>
<td>Holocaust Journey</td>
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<td>Spring 2013</td>
<td>Semester at Heidelberg Research with a German professor</td>
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<td>Research in German churches, libraries, and museums</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summer 2013</td>
<td>Internship with Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.</td>
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<td>Fall 2013</td>
<td>Write research paper</td>
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<td>REL499 (4 credit hours)</td>
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<td>Develop Presentation for church councils</td>
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<td>Winter 2014</td>
<td>Submit abstracts to SURF/NCUR/SECSOR</td>
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<td>REL499 (2 credit hour)</td>
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<td>Write curriculum for churches</td>
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<td>Spring 2014</td>
<td>Present at SURF/NCUR/SECSOR</td>
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<td>Senior Seminar</td>
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<td>Symposium at Elon</td>
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Bibliography


Personal Information and Signatures:

Name: Datatel ID #:  

Major(s): Religious Studies  Minor(s): Philosophy, German Studies

Local Address (include city, state, zip): 5039 Campus Box Elon, N.C. 27244  

Primary telephone:  Elon email:  

Started at Elon [mm/yyyy]: 08/2010  Expected Graduation [mm/yyyy]: 05/2014  

[Include the following statement in your application.]  The student’s typed name below serves as his/her electronic signature and indicates that the information contained in the application is accurate, and reflects his or her best faith plans for intellectual/creative activities during the remaining two years at Elon. Applicant hereby gives the Selection Committee permission to obtain a copy of current transcript and summary of any judicial system records concerning Honor Code violations. Recipients of the Lumen Prize will be asked to sign a Letter of Agreement indicating their commitment to uphold the standards associated with being a Lumen Scholar.

__________________________  (Applicant’s “signature”)  Date 14 March 2012

The faculty/staff mentor’s typed name below serves as his/her electronic signature and indicates support of the proposal described herein and willingness to serve as an ongoing mentor to the applicant.

__________________________  (Mentor’s “signature”)  Date 14 March 2012