

ENCOUNTERING AND COUNTERING TRIBAL CONFLICT WITH FILM AND DIALOGUE

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I

INTRODUCTION

Douglas Yarn and Gregory Jones assert that reconciliation must take place on an individual level.¹ We must each agree. But to what extent can a leader speak for a group or tribe? Can two warring tribes, for example, be reconciled with each other because their respective leaders reconcile? This is the question behind a project my colleagues and I initiated in 2005, after our creation of the film, *Theologians Under Hitler*.²

First, the film: *Theologians Under Hitler* was a documentary-film adaptation of a book by the same name, written in 1985 by Dr. Robert Ericksen.³ In his study, Ericksen profiled three well-known Protestant theologians who supported Adolf Hitler: Paul Althaus, a Luther scholar at Erlangen University; Emanuel Hirsch, a systematic theologian at Göttingen University; and Gerhard Kittel, a professor of the New Testament at Tübingen University. The book and film provoke a disturbing set of questions, the most important of which is, What does it mean when smart, learned, and otherwise moral people get it wrong?

II

THE FILM'S RECEPTION

The subject of the film is less important than the conversation it brought forth. The film was completed in the summer of 2005 and was then prepared for a fall broadcast on public television. The national climate in matters of church–

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1. Douglas H. Yarn & Gregory Todd Jones, *A Biological Approach to Understanding Resistance to Apology, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation in Group Conflict*, 72 LAW & CONTEMP. PROBS. 63, 63 (Spring 2008).

2. THEOLOGIANS UNDER HITLER (Vital Visuals 2005).

3. ROBERT P. ERIKSEN, THEOLOGIANS UNDER HITLER: GERHARD KITTEL, PAUL ALTHAUS AND EMANUEL HIRSCH (1987).

state separation was particularly tense at that time. President Bush was nominating judges for the federal bench⁴ and Representative Tom Delay was stumping for these nominees from the pulpit of Two Rivers Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee, at one of two “Justice Sunday” events.⁵ Two Supreme Court justices would leave the bench that summer,⁶ and the church members were being exhorted for support.

It is appropriate to understand the political and religious conflict in America today as a kind of *tribalism*: identity-based conflict seems to be less about a clear articulation of differing ideals than about which team one cheers for. Much of the time it is not clear whether we are Democrats or Republicans, Methodists or Baptists, in ways fundamentally different than we are Patriots or Giants fans. And yet each of these labels articulates a deep sense of group identification that lies at the very core of what it means to be human.

This type of tribalism was at play among the churches and religious groups in America at the time of our film’s debut. On one hand, we saw the film ride a wave of support, for many feared that America was reliving another, more sinister, time, when churches were rallied to support the social-engineering project known as National Socialism. It is always a heady experience when one’s work is recognized and valued. But we soon grew to fear that a more dangerous set of events was taking place. We created this film not as *contemporary* social commentary, but as a way of remembering and processing an important history. We were concerned that the play of current politics around our film was actually putting the memory of that very history we cared so deeply about at risk. Tribalistic tendencies were going to affect the way *Theologians Under Hitler* would be received.

III

THE PROJECT

In order to preserve our focus on a history (the participation of the German churches in the Nazi movement) that had been all but forgotten, we knew we had to address the divide in American religious politics. Specifically, if the Religious Left was willing to use the film as a weapon against the Religious Right,⁷ working to gain agreement between the groups about the implications of the film’s subject might help us avoid the problems we were experiencing with the public’s failing to understand the film’s historical thrust. And, as a valuable

4. Peter Baker, *Bush Nominates Roberts as Chief Justice; President Seeks Quick Approval with Another Seat Left to Fill*, WASH. POST, Sept. 6, 2005, at A1.

5. Thomas B. Edsall, *Conservatives Rally for Justices; Leaders Ask for Nominees Who Will End Abortion and Gay Rights*, WASH. POST, Aug. 15, 2005, at A2.

6. Charles Lane, *Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist Dies*, WASH. POST, Sept. 4, 2005, at A1.

7. Glenn Smith, organizer of the “Community of Faith and Unity Gathering,” which took place in Nashville on the same evening as the “Justice Sunday II” rally, hoped to use *Theologians Under Hitler* as part of the Gathering.

side benefit, we might help lower the tension between these warring tribes and contribute to a more peaceful America.

This was an ambitious plan, to say the least. As long as conservative, evangelical Christians saw the film as an implied attack against themselves and their leaders, they would not take it seriously. Also, if progressive Christians were allowed to use the film to attack others, they would be blind to the ways in which they too might be informed by this history. Years of blaming the other would make it difficult to come to a common understanding about the importance of the history of the churches during Nazi times. But the ability to interpret history would only be enhanced by reducing the level of tribal conflict.

Our plan would succeed if we could begin peacemaking, and extend that peacemaking from each tribe's leadership down to the tribe itself. We chose a sample of some of the most powerful leaders in America's religious-political sphere. These leaders included Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention, Bob Edgar of the National Council of Churches, Gary Cass of the Center for Reclaiming America for Christ, Barry Lynn of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, Richard Scarborough of Vision America, and others. A total of eighteen leaders from a wide spectrum of perspectives came together for a weekend in Nashville, Tennessee, in the spring of 2006 to collaboratively create a set of shared values around the film.

The session was moderated by Roger Conner of Vanderbilt University Law School and Meghan Clarke of the Aria Group, using the Collaborative Change Approach (CCA).⁸ The CCA melds Aria's C3 methods of building agreements in areas of conflict with the William Bridges Transitions Framework, a way of understanding psychological processes during times of change.⁹ The Transitions Framework would help us as we guided these divided leaders from confrontation toward conversation; the Aria C3 Process would help them forge a set of shared values.

Several parameters were set for this discussion. Most importantly, there would be no audio or video recordings made, and no quotes would be attributable to any person. It would be a safe space in which all viewpoints would be respected, but no unity would be enforced.

8. *See generally* The Aria Group, www.ariagroup.com/visionLINK1.html. *See also* Andrus Family Fund, Overview of the Collaborative Change Approach, <http://www.affund.org/pdfs/CCA.pdf> ("The Collaborative Change Approach (CCA) is a process for helping grantees engage multiple stakeholders in the creation and implementation of lasting change. Through this approach, convening organizations help members of a community articulate their underlying core values, name the change they seek, and develop a realistic and sustainable plan to achieve their defined change.").

9. WILLIAM BRIDGES, *MANAGING TRANSITIONS: MAKING THE MOST OF CHANGE* (2d ed. 2003).

IV

A SUCCESSFUL RESULT—OR BEGINNING

After several hours of sometimes intense conversation, the group unanimously agreed upon the following shared-values statement:

The Nashville Declaration
on the Church and the Holocaust

We grieve over the fact and condemn participation of segments of the faith community in the evils of National Socialism in the Third Reich.

1. In our faith community, we pledge to have our convictions and actions formed by our faith, and not by the culture or the political powers, and we seek to identify and address errors that our own community and other communities are making in our own time.
2. We strive to be a faithful, prophetic force in society and to resist the temptation to follow uncritically the popular and the powerful.
3. We acknowledge and discuss historical events where we have corrupted our faith and allowed ourselves to be exploited by political agendas, parties, and nationalism and corroded by philosophies that neutralize the prophetic voice of a transcendent moral order.
4. We recognize the inherent and equal value innate in every human being, and we oppose attitudes, ideas, or policies that diminish the dignity of any person or dehumanize any group of individuals.
5. We maintain appropriate distinctions between piety and patriotism, between God and government.
6. We affirm the responsibility to engage in the process of open discussion and debate to help protect a society or a community from moral catastrophe, and we defend the right of all people to freedoms of religion, speech, assembly, press, and dissent in our society.

The Nashville Dialogue
April 21–22, 2006¹⁰

Writing a statement is one thing, bringing about real change is another. Our next step would be some symbolic presentation of this statement, something that would signify an end to the spirit of confrontation between these leaders. Each leader was asked to submit an article on *Theologians Under Hitler* for a study guide on the film. Participants were asked to write in accordance with the spirit of “The Nashville Declaration.” This study guide would be used primarily in Christian church-based study groups. The result of this effort, *A Question of Power*, was published in the fall of 2006.¹¹

10. A QUESTION OF POWER 97 (Steven D. Martin ed., 2006).

11. *Id.*

Another important step came in February 2007, when the participants were invited to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. There, the group was honored with a dinner and reception, and a framed copy of “The Nashville Declaration” was presented to the museum.

These events can be seen as rituals that announce an ending to old ways of confrontation. It is one thing to arrive at a point of unanimous consensus in a private setting; but by publicly announcing this unanimity, these leaders have shown a real change in direction. These participants have also begun working together—by speaking at college events, inviting each other to teach in their classrooms—something that would not have happened prior to these conversations. William Bridges anticipates these rituals as important signs of “endings,” celebrating an end to old ways and the beginning of a wilderness road he describes as the “neutral zone.”¹²

V

FINAL THOUGHTS

Will this new perspective change the way these participants’ constituencies, their *tribes*, deal with each other? This is quite another matter, and something that may be impossible to measure. But a constituent group’s attitudes can deeply reflect those of its leadership. A leader who changes course too quickly loses his or her constituents, but one who is able to shift in measured terms will see the constituents shift as well.

One final note regarding the willingness of our project participants to change: Once a level of trust had been established in our conversation, many observed how tired they were of fighting. This could be the most hopeful sign of all: Weary of the battle, leaders in the so-called “culture wars” may themselves be seeking the peace that we hope they will seek. In any conflict, warring parties come to the negotiating table when they have had enough suffering. It is possible that a project such as ours could then be seen as “permission giving,” demonstrating to them the efficacy of dialogue.

Our project gives only anecdotal support to Yarn’s and Jones’s thesis, but perhaps this is its greatest value. After the controlled studies are done and the statistics prove the thesis, real-world work, with all its ambiguities, must finally be undertaken. And leaders must take the necessary risks to move their constituencies in a positive direction.

12. BRIDGES, *supra* note 10, at 4–5.