

Scapegoating, Terrorism and the Innocent Victim

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Steven Walker, SAS- Asian Language & Cultures

T 09:50A-12:50P

Honors College Seminar Room S124

College Ave Campus

Will Count Towards SAS- Asian Language & Cultures Major

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Scapegoating and terrorism have been the bane of human history and are a serious problem for society today. As analyzed by René Girard in his classic study The Scapegoat, scapegoating involves the accusation and punishment of innocent victims for crimes they have not committed. For Girard, scapegoats are *always* innocent of the specific charges laid against them; the accusations are *always* false; scapegoating is *always* a heinous act of injustice. So why do people do it? As we shall see, scapegoating is a largely *unconscious* process, involving what the psychologist C.G. Jung has called “shadow projection.” If people were aware of what they were doing, they would not scapegoat, since the idea of punishing people for crimes they have not committed deeply offends our ethical sense.

Terrorism might seem to be a related, if distinct, phenomenon. It, too, punishes innocent victims. However, by contrast with scapegoating, terrorism involves the *deliberate and conscious* choice of its victims. But to what degree might it also, like scapegoating, involve *unconscious* shadow projection? This is one of the questions we will address in the course of the latter part of the seminar.

Understanding the paradigm of scapegoating is fairly simple, but analyzing in depth the occurrences of scapegoating can be complicated. For that reason we will first look to literary texts such as Kafka’s The Metamorphosis, the Book of Job and E.M. Forster’s A Passage to India for clear illustrations of this complex phenomenon. Scapegoating theory may be clear, but life is messy; fortunately, art can often clarify what is obscure and murky in real life. Having gotten a clear sense of the process of scapegoating through the study of some pertinent literary texts, we will move on to examining actual occurrences of scapegoating in real life, including bullying and xenophobic persecution. For, in the end, the study of scapegoating also has a practical dimension, in that it should enable us to recognize scapegoating when it begins to occur and to intervene before the process turns catastrophic.

Terrorism, by contrast, might seem to be a simple case of horrible people choosing deliberately to do heinous acts. Louise Richardson’s book What Terrorists Want provides a more nuanced perspective, and —somewhat paradoxically—so will an ancient Greek tragedy, Sophocles’ Ajax. From a practical standpoint, understanding terrorism as a pseudo-rational but also unconsciously motivated process may suggest better ways of reacting to it and of dealing with it more effectively.

STEVEN F. WALKER, Professor of Comparative Literature, got his Ph.D. from Harvard (Comparative Literature: French, Greek, Sanskrit), and his BA from Wisconsin-Madison (Greek). He is interested in the interface of literature and psychology. He enjoys playing classical piano music, hiking, trying to meditate, and analyzing films. His most recent book is *Midlife Transformation in Literature and Film: Jungian and Eriksonian Perspectives* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012).