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HIST 643  
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### Propaganda as Reformation Rhetoric

The invention of the printing press <sup>not immediately, as it was still a</sup> revolutionized the transmission of thought in <sup>largely</sup> the 16th century. Books, though expensive, were available to people of means and <sup>oral</sup> literacy. <sup>(10% of population at most)</sup> Illustrations in the form of woodcuts became an integral part of any book. As <sup>culture</sup> the Reformation gained speed, printing and woodcuts became the common banners of the new movement. Through broadsheets, pamphlets, flyers and books the doctrine, figures and thrusts of the new Church were easily and widely distributed throughout Germany.

R.W. Scribner's book, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation*, addresses the illustrations found on these materials and their effect on the contemporary religious climate. These propaganda messages addressed all levels of society; they combined pictures, captions and text to attract the illiterate, partially literate and literate. The picture served as an attention-getting device for the literate but served as the substance of the message for the illiterate. Conversely, the accompanying text served as substance for the literate and, provided they could find someone to read it to them, supplemental material for the illiterate. By combining

media, Reformation propagandists were able to use both popular culture and popular beliefs to create a new way to disseminate information.

The propaganda of the Evangelical movement used symbols and images familiar to the population to simplify the Reformation. They created new concepts, such as the struggle between the old and new churches and subsequently perpetuated these new concepts through back-referencing previous editions of broadsheets and other propaganda materials (242-3). Propagandists used popular culture, popular belief and popular prophecy to establish this new art form in the mind of the common man. The reformers were then able to use this propaganda to get their ideas to the majority of the people they wanted to reach, literate or not, and explain the new doctrine, church and ideology.

Popular culture as it applies to Evangelical propaganda is a system of social customs, non-elite culture and superstition as it relates to secular activity (59). Popular belief in this context applies to sacred and religious activities (61), strong senses of pessimism and fatalism, the powerful influence of astrology, a culture-based belief in signs and omens and a long tradition of mystical prophecy seen in this era as Joachimism (117). When combined with symbolic or realistic figures, the propagandists were able to play off the fears of the common folk and get their message across. The figures used were both good and evil according to contemporary Evangelical definitions. Among the

good symbols were Luther, God, Christ, Justice, Reason, Law, Truth, Conscience, Piety, Faith, Hope and Love. The symbols of evil were more numerous, including the Devil, the pope and his cardinals, bishops and monks, the Anti-Christ, the three Furies embodied as Megaera (hatred), Alecto (matri-/patricide) and Tisiphone (demonic possession), Tyranny, Avarice, Hypocrisy, Greed, Death, Deceit, Sin, Despair, Disobedience and Persecution. Monsters such as the Monk Calf and the Papal Ass were also used as symbols of disorder that were supposedly allowed to exist by God as a sign of his disappointment with man (Illus. 97, 98, p. 129).

The propagandists used four styles of propaganda: comedy, positive, negative and instructional. Comedic and negative methods (i.e., attacks) were likely to be the most effective as one binds with laughter and the other with hatred, two of the more base emotions. Comedy elevated the mundane to the level of importance. In this way a simple game can become a symbolic battle between good and evil or between the true and false churches. One very successful example of this method uses a common game called *Strebkatz* in which two opponents hold rods connected by rope in their mouths and try to pull each other off balance (61). By pitting Luther against the pope in this game, with a cross as the prize (Illus. 43, p. 60), a skillful propagandist is able to convey the new, symbolic importance of this everyday game.

Prospective targets for ridiculous treatment were anything that was primarily Catholic or had a prominent visual aspect (96). Comedy cut the lofty down to size. Satire and parodies of elitist activities such as jousts, tournaments, hunts and triumphs were traditionally part of Carnival celebrations. Other events were mocked as well, usually in the context of Carnival, such as baptisms, masses and processions. The visual aspect of these performances lent itself quite easily to illustration (68) and the propagandists used them effectively to transmit the excesses and abuses of the Roman Catholic Church (Illus. 71, 72, pp. 96-9). The use of puppets and animal masks during Carnival also lent itself to print, as the pope could be shown as a puppet of Satan or wearing a fool's mask or animal's face and would therefore take on the characteristics of a demon, fool or animal. Other visually oriented objects, such as hymn books, candle and incense holders, banners and similar holy items were often replaced in the woodcuts by devices of gluttony (food or drink), folly (fool's caps or toys) and vice (98).

Many animals with popular symbolism portrayed not only the pope, but monks, cardinals, bishops and other powerful Catholics. The dog, pig and ass were demonic symbols. The ass represented folly as well and translated directly into the picture of the Papal Ass. Foxes and wolves, dangerous, wily and sly creatures, stole away the innocent lambs of the new church. Ferocity was displayed in the forms of the lion, bear, tiger and dragon. Goats and rabbits symbolized the randiness and laziness of the monks. Only two

*No animals present at the feet of Christ*

animals – sheep or lambs and oxen – show up representing the common man; the sheep as innocence and the ox as patience. (76, 85, 129, 145)

In remarkable similarity to modern comedy, propagandists made use of scatological humor to attract the common man as well. Depictions of various scatological functions heaped derision and humiliation on the Catholic Church in general or the pope in particular. Defecating into the papal tiara, baring bottoms toward the pope and farting at him are surely signs of derision meant to denigrate completely both the man and his office. Defecation takes on a more in-depth symbolism, however, as in Illustrations 62, 63 and 64. One of Luther's opponents, Cochleus, is portrayed as the oral recipient of Satan's excrement and Cochleus in turn is excreting books which his monastic followers are eagerly snatching up (85). The monks and the pope are both shown as products of a devil's digestive tract, signifying both their origin and their place in the world (85-6).

Positive propaganda tried valiantly to portray Luther and the Evangelical movement in the best possible light to its adherents and their prospective converts. Luther was portrayed as a pious monk and teacher. Illustrations of Luther's position as Christ's ally showed his new role as both prophet and saint and led to a near deification of the man. Illustration 23 shows Luther as the German Hercules, fighting to earn his title as Propagator of Christian Liberty (33). The strength and determination accorded

to Luther as Hercules could hardly have been lost on the average man, whether he was literate or not. This attachment of Luther to classical history also served to legitimize his struggle, as no one would have been likely to see the mighty Hercules as having anything other than the highest of intentions.

Extant negative propaganda materials from the Reformation era could possibly be the first legitimate documentation of a mudslinging campaign, which along with scatological humor could be the propagandists' primary contribution to modern politics.

In 1523 Leonard Beck began publishing woodcuts that portrayed monks as fearful of Christ and as thieves or lazy alcoholics. Other negative devices showed wolves dressed in Catholic vestments – the pope's tiara and monk's caps or habits – stealing the lambs of God (the common man) from the foot of Christ's cross and taking them into a barren and desolate land to reside with goats (lost souls) (Illus. 40, p. 56). The negative propaganda also depicted established Catholic leaders as self-serving men more interested in whoring and money than in the welfare of the common man. The pope and his monks had a solitary place as captain and crew of a ship of fools, a frail vessel that would only lead the people to ruin, death and destruction (108-9).

In addition to its ~~previously mentioned~~ goals of belittling the papacy and installing the Evangelical movement as its righteous opposite and presenting the Reformation in the best possible light, propaganda also attempted to legitimize the Reformation as a

movement with significantly distinct doctrines and religious characteristics that were separate from the Roman Catholic tradition (190). To this third end, propaganda was also a teaching tool. Instructional propaganda showed the common man who the primary advocates of Reformation thought were and who their obvious enemies were as well. It created powerful images associated with Luther and presented a clear definition of a separate church (227-8). It used biblical metaphors to drive home the symbolic differences between the new and old churches; the vineyard of Christ prospering on the side of Luther and dying on the side of the pope was one metaphor. Another, perhaps more blunt metaphor and one that would have been much more symbolically effective was in the form of the house built on sand (the Catholic church) and the house built on rock (the Evangelical church). This instructional method was also successful in reminding the people of differences between the Lutheran and other Evangelical movements, an example of which is portraying an infant baptism in a Lutheran broadsheet to separate them from the practices of the Anabaptists (Illus. 165, p. 202).

The widespread use of Evangelical propaganda had a major impact on the efforts of the Reformation movement. By using elements of existing tradition, whether it be in the form of popular culture, popular beliefs, superstition, fear, or traditional imagery and symbols, propagandists were able to educate just about everyone on the figures and doctrines of the new church. Literacy was not a prerequisite to absorbing this

information, as the text of illustrated broadsheets was intended to be supplementary material expanding the symbolism and imagery of the illustration. In this way the new church embraced the illiterate man that made up a large majority of Germany's population during the Reformation. The inclusion of the common man in the new church must have been a heady event after said man had spent his whole life in strict adherence to rituals he did not know the significance of and attendance to masses he could not even understand. Evangelical propaganda tied the Reformation movement in with culture and provoked a cultural response to the new church. Its appeal was to the common man as an individual Evangelical Christian (247). Propaganda used its new medium to form a bridge across literacy boundaries and to build a new language of images that future church adherents could use for their own purposes (248).

BT

Good analysis of the book, but you need to answer the questions of the assignment more explicitly. For example, was the propaganda effort successful? Scribner is more pessimistic than you seem to be (pp 248-9), for example. Still, very good coverage.