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Religious Hate Propaganda: Dangerous Accusations and the Meaning of Religious Persecution in Light of the Cognitive Science of Religion

Jordan Kiper

Department of Anthropology, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, AL 35294, USA; jkiper@uab.edu

Abstract: Religious hate propaganda, which is sustained communication by an authority that attempts to guide an audience towards persecuting others based on religion, is a speech crime. Yet, it is one of the least understood and most difficult speech crimes to prosecute. This is due to misunderstandings and epistemic gaps regarding how persecutory language, which would otherwise have little significance for prosocial religious adherents, becomes meaningful for a religious community. Drawing from the cognitive science of religion (CSR), this article develops and explores the hypothesis that for some religious communities, discursive attacks on others become meaningful when they center on dangerous accusations. Dangerous accusations portray the other as capable of mystical harm and, when made by cultural authorities, become socially accepted truths if repeated during rituals of veridiction. This article shows that dangerous accusations are at the heart of religious hate propaganda and exploit cognitive biases for threat perception, coalitional psychology, and costly signaling. Moreover, dangerous accusations can reinforce the social order and maintain social cohesion. Together, an analysis of speech crimes and dangerous accusations shed light on how religious hate propaganda works, how it can offer meaning to religious communities, and how it can justify persecution in certain environments.

Keywords: cognitive science of religion; dangerous speech; meaning; mystical harm; religious hate propaganda; religious persecution; speech crimes



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1. Introduction

An ongoing question for human rights scholars involved in transitional justice is how communities, whose members once lived in relative peace, came to support or engage in violent attacks on neighbors (Bemmel and Alvarez 2017, pp. 184–85; Forsythe 2011, p. 85). Answering this question is all the more challenging in religious contexts where observers have asked how religious adherents, whose religious tradition also includes peace values, could tolerate the persecution of others (Badar and Florijančić 2020b, pp. 31–32; Little 2011, p. 9; Wilson 2020, pp. 81–82; see also Bachelet 2020). Several legal theorists have argued that one of the main causes of discrimination, persecution, and atrocities is hate propaganda (e.g., Badar and Florijančić 2020a; Dojčinović 2012a, 2020a; George 2021; Timmermann 2005). Such violence is said to result from communication by an authority figure who demonizes a targeted other within a closed marketplace of ideas (or echo chamber; see Leader Maynard and Benesch 2016, p. 79) during societal crises and exploits historical fears about intergroup conflict (Gavrilets and Richerson 2022). In these conditions, an audience is more vulnerable than otherwise to seeing itself as victims under existential threat and whose violence against others is justified, in which case hate propaganda is believed to increase the likelihood and imminence of violence (see also Kearney 2007).

It is not my intention to challenge this perspective or its legal significance (in fact, colleagues and I have defended it elsewhere; see Wilson and Kiper 2020; Kiper 2019; Kiper and Sosis 2016). Rather, I wish to work from the legal understanding of speech crimes

to consider an often-overlooked question in human rights: how does hate propaganda become meaningful for religious communities?

Finding myself at the intersection of human rights and the cognitive science of religion (CSR), I believe the latter can shed light on the former. By drawing from CSR, my central thesis is that when it comes to religious hate propaganda, courts have underestimated its influence as compared to other forms of hate speech, and most scholars have overlooked its role in coalitional building as compared to ideologies that radicalize a minority of perpetrators. Furthermore, what gets routinely missed is that religious hate propaganda is a modern expression of what I will describe as dangerous accusations, which are akin to witchcraft beliefs, apostasy, and moral panics, and can make persecution a meaning-making act. Yet, the meaningfulness of these accusations stems not from their explicit ideological content but rather the ritualized means by which the accusation is conveyed.

To justify my position, I develop my discussion in stages. I begin with the legal concept of dangerous speech to bridge the difficulties of prosecuting religious hate propaganda with epistemic gaps regarding the meaningfulness of hateful language for some religious communities. I then connect recent speech crime cases to dangerous accusations, which occur in all cultures but most notably where strong political institutions are weak and informal political networks are strong. After that I show how the meaning—and meaningfulness—of religious hate propaganda is explained, at least in large part, by CSR. To conclude, I argue that countering religious hate propaganda requires less focus on ideology and more on the conditions that allow dangerous accusations to become meaningful and thereby justify violence and silence would-be objectors.

2. Religious Hate Propaganda

In the related fields of international human rights and criminal law, *propaganda* is understood as “communication that attempts to achieve a response [in a targeted audience] that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett and O’Donnell 2018, p. 7). Though broadly described, the definitional stress on intent is key. Based on legal precedents from Nuremberg to recent speech crime trials (see Benesch 2008; Gordon 2017; Kearney 2007; Wilson 2017) and from international legal instruments from the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR; United Nations 1966) to the United Nations’ recent strategies for addressing hate speech (see the Office of Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect 2019), propaganda is considered prohibitable only if the author intentionally advocated one of two speech crimes.¹ One is *advocacy of hatred* (or *hate propaganda*, henceforth), which involves the direct and public incitement to genocide or the instigation of persecution against a person or group in the form of discrimination, hostility, or collective violence (Lerner 2010, p. 137). The other is *propaganda for war*, which involves any public relations campaign that aims to direct people’s attitudes towards supporting wars of aggression against a civilian population (Dojčinović 2020a, pp. 4–6). Criminality in both cases is targeting another for contempt, based on their social identity (Badar and Florijančić 2021, p. 496). These speech crimes regularly precede mass atrocities; therefore, they are commonly referred to as *dangerous speech* (Benesch et al. 2021, p. 5).

To avoid debates regarding the prosecutorial neglect of propaganda for war (e.g., Kiper 2015a), I shall limit my discussion to hate propaganda within a state’s boundaries, including advocacy that contributes to persecutions and sectarian conflict. In these circumstances, a central feature of hate propaganda, as it concerns the prohibition thereof, is that it carries an implicit reference to inflict harm on a targeted other. That is, a recognizable civilian population or person who is portrayed as different from or no longer belonging to the ingroup, and is represented as a threat, for whom ingroup disregard is warranted (Dojčinović 2020a, p. 4). Provided the relativity of linguistic and cultural implications, the modality of hate propaganda will inevitably vary cross-culturally, but it is everywhere identifiable by whether:

1. It is designed or circulated by an authority, charismatic leader, influencer, or powerful source of information relative to an audience;
2. It implies an intention to inflict violence on a targeted other, to destroy the other in whole or in part, or to inflict severe discrimination that results in the denial or infringement of the other's fundamental rights;
3. The intended audience trusts or acts on (1) and is capable of carrying out (2) (Wilson and Kiper 2020; Dojčinović 2020b; Gordon 2017; Leader Maynard and Benesch 2016).

At speech crime trials, (1) is usually apparent in the speech acts that are most approximate to violence, (2) is indicated by the propagandist's direct calls for violence, and (3) is evident whenever the audience justifies (2) by repeating the very language used by the propagandist. Nevertheless, it should be noted that despite this general schema, the legal definition of speech crimes varies somewhat by country and is sometimes conditioned by emergency conditions such as crimes related to terrorism.

The above schema is as pragmatic as it is consistent with *actus reus* and *mens rea* (or relational proof for a guilty act and mind, respectively). For whenever propagandists are put on trial, they regularly deny that they ever intended to instigate violence. Yet, that denial is often betrayed by the fact that they used an epithet, coded speech, or a conspiratorial narrative that the audience thereafter used to justify discrimination, hostility, or violence. This linguistic connection is called a *mental fingerprint* and connects (1), (2), and (3) from above, and demonstrates "mental causation and shared criminal intent" (Wilson 2017, p. 274). As a legal precedent, the mental fingerprint concept originated at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTR), where prosecutors demonstrated a joint criminal enterprise between Serb propagandists and perpetrators by linking the former's narrative of a "Greater Serbia" to the latter's justifications for mass atrocity crimes (Dojčinović 2012b, p. 95). Insofar as the ICTY is one of the most influential tribunals for speech crime trials, the mental fingerprint concept and other legal precedents, such as those mentioned later in this article, will inform future cases.

Hate propaganda is further broken down by its subject matter and targeted outgroup identity. Often overlapping, these include, among other things, racial, ethnic, nationalistic, or religious hate speech. Critically for what follows, hate speech is a one-time linguistic act, while hate propaganda spans a concerted information campaign that includes the repetition of hate speech therein (Dojčinović 2020a, pp. 6–9). Religion, albeit a fuzzy concept that is based on prototypes or family resemblances in CSR (see Sosis 2020, pp. 144–48), is a complex topic in law (Gunn 2003), whose definition varies depending on the geopolitical and legal context. For our purposes, religion is an identity informed by tradition and way of life, if not a theistic or non-theistic set of beliefs (Gunn 2003, pp. 200–5) that is analyzable as a complex adaptive system, which coheres with the core constituents of what is known in CSR as the *religious system*,² but is expressed relatively to a local history and ecology (see also Kiper and Sosis 2014, 2020). *Religious hate propaganda* is therefore any sustained communication by an authority who attempts to guide an audience towards destroying, harming, persecuting, or infringing on the fundamental rights of others based on the shared religious motivations of the perpetrators or the religious identity of the victim(s) (Badar and Florijančić 2021; Moon 2018).

3. The Difficulties of Prosecuting Religious Hate Propaganda

Religious hate propaganda remains an influential factor in political extremism, sectarian violence, and persecution (e.g., Badar and Florijančić 2021) but is rarely prosecuted, as compared to other speech crimes (see Moon 2018). This is remarkable considering that interreligious conflicts have outpaced other forms of collective violence in the twenty-first century (Muggah and Velshi 2019) and religion continues to play an outsized role in justifying intergroup hostilities worldwide (e.g., Fearon and Laitin 2003; Kiper and Sosis 2016). Yet, discursive attacks on others that draw on religious content raise the following five difficulties for prosecutors.

First, courts are reluctant about prosecuting religious propagandists because religion itself is a protected category (Bonotti 2017, pp. 272–73; see also Moon 2018). To demonstrate, I will here focus on anti-LGBTQ+ campaigns in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe; my aim is not to question the liberal safeguarding of religious speech, but to point out a consequence of current legal thought when evaluating religious influence. Whether it is the Westboro Baptist Church's public celebrations over gay deaths and the propagation of such public sentiments elsewhere (Ndjio 2016, p. 123) or fundamentalists openly calling for "killing out" gay people (Hill 2019), anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech is often judged indecent but protected speech. The same reasoning informs religious propaganda cases. For instance, when Christian militants spread misinformation about LGBTQ+ people, they often invoke biblical verses (e.g., Petrović 2020) as the basis for their calls to violence, such as *Leviticus* 20:13, which states that if a man lies with another man, he should be put to death (Moon 2018, p. 21). If repeated and taken seriously by an audience who is capable of violence, especially if repeated by perpetrators in the act of violence, such language would constitute hate propaganda. Yet, liberal speech restrictions and safeguards for religious belief regularly entail judicial reluctance about infringing on religious speech freedoms.

Second, proving that a religious propagandist intended violence is difficult compared to other propaganda campaigns. Granted, courts have stressed in several acquittals that sustained religious hate speech would indeed cross the line into hate propaganda if it failed to contribute to public discourse, clearly intended to cause injury, and was likely to do so (Moon 2018, p. 19). The problem is that propagandists are careful to frame their exclusionary ideologies, hateful rhetoric, and implied violence using their religious tradition. Moreover, courts have often reasoned that if rhetoric is grounded in a religious tradition that also includes peace values, then it is unlikely that the propaganda would result in imminent violence (Britt 2010; Howard 2017; Moon 2018). For the audience could draw from other parts of their tradition to evaluate and dismiss language that implies persecution. These factors have resulted in numerous acquittals even when the propagandist portrayed the other as less than human, conspiring to harm children, brainwashing educators, or deserving death (for a review, see Moon 2018).³

Third, religious hate propaganda that originates with political authorities, who base it on an official or majoritarian state religion, are rarely prosecuted. To illustrate, consider the case of religious persecution in Myanmar of Rohingya Muslims. From 2012 to 2018, the Myanmar military utilized Facebook, where they created hundreds of fake accounts to propagate misinformation about the Rohingya, including accusations of poisoning, raping, and murdering non-Muslims (Mozur 2018). These accusations told a similar story; the Rohingya had a pathological inclination for hating non-Muslims, were polluting Myanmar's society, posed a global threat to Buddhism, and were plotting jihadist attacks on neighboring communities. As such, these accusations repeated the propaganda of Burmese Buddhist authorities, such as Ashin Wirathu, whose anti-Muslim sermons since 2003 resulted in numerous mob attacks on Rohingya (Oppenheim 2017). Wirathu has also sponsored billboards throughout Myanmar featuring photographs of corpses and mutilated bodies that Wirathu falsely claimed were victims of Rohingya. Throughout his propaganda campaigns, Wirathu has described Rohingya as "mad dogs" who were demonic and pathologically violent (Fuller 2013). Although Facebook has faced lawsuits for negligence (Gilbert 2021), Wirathu and other Buddhist authorities have by and large dodged judicial accountability at the local level.

Fourth, when cases are not handled locally but are taken up by international courts, prosecutors avoid debates over religious rhetoric altogether and instead focus on what I have called "end game analysis" (Kiper 2018, 2019). This is prosecuting only the most proximate speech act that preceded violence. As an illustration, in 2018, at the most recent international speech crime trial, the Appeals Chamber of the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT) convicted Vojislav Šešelj, a Serb propagandist, of persecution, yet only for a single speech. However, even in this instance, understanding Šešelj's entire propaganda campaign was necessary for comprehending the effects of his

speech, despite not playing a critical role in his conviction (Kiper 2019). During the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001), Šešelj and many other Serb ultranationalists advocated for ethnically cleansing Serbia of Croats and Bosnians. Common justifications were based on false accusations that Croats, who were breaking away from Yugoslavia to form an independent state, were creating an ultra-fascist government that would force Serbs to convert to Catholicism or face expulsion if not extermination (Timmerman 2019). Another accusation was that Bosnians were plotting to subjugate Serbs and create an Islamic state (e.g., Kiper 2019). For many Serbs, these accusations conjured up historical traumas that Šešelj exploited by claiming that Serbs would disappear unless they fought for a “Greater Serbia” cleansed of non-Serbs (see also Kiper 2022). Despite these propaganda campaigns, Šešelj was convicted for only one speech he gave in the village of Hrtkovci, where he called on followers to expel Croats, who Šešelj described as fascists. As with other speech crime trials, the deciding factor was not religious hate propaganda but the fact that within hours of Šešelj’s speech, Croats began fleeing en masse from Hrtkovci (Timmerman 2019, pp. 107–9).⁴

Fifth, and related to the last point, speech crime trials are challenged by the judicial constraint of demonstrating a “possible causal-link” between propaganda and violence.⁵ As a result of this requirement, prosecutors must take an entire propaganda campaign into account when considering the influence of the propagandist but center their cases on the most proximate speech act to violence. Proximity is here a reasonable temporal connection between the timing of inciting speech and subsequent perpetration, alongside social conditions indicating imminence and likelihood of violence (Kiper 2015a; Benesch 2012). Those conditions are that the propagandist was an authority who dehumanized an outgroup and portrayed the ingroup as unquestionably virtuous, and the audience was in fact prepared for violence (Wilson and Kiper 2020; Leader Maynard and Benesch 2016). If these are present, then the speech act just prior to perpetrated violence is considered the cause thereof. Consequentially, much attention is given to dehumanizing speech that immediately precedes violence, while religious hate propaganda that is repeated across a propaganda campaign falls by the wayside (Kiper et al. 2020; Badar and Florijančić 2021, 2020a, 2020b).

4. Epistemic Gaps in Understanding Religious Hate Propaganda

Here, I begin my transition to CSR by suggesting that in addition to the legal challenges outlined in the last section, there is currently an epistemic gap in understanding how religious hate propaganda works. For most scholars, questions about religion and instigation rely on answers centered around ideology (e.g., Cavanaugh 2009; Juergensmeyer 2022). That is, “a set of ideas, beliefs, opinions, values, and practices held and deployed by significant groups to compete for control over social influence and to justify and rationalize preferred social ideals” (Wildman et al. 2021, p. 214). Although ideology contributes to political discord between some religious communities (e.g., Armaly et al. 2022) and regularly informs statements by leaders who justify religious violence (Rachik 2009, p. 347; Wellman 2008, p. 89), ideology does not instigate violence. What speech crime trials have revealed is that only certain communication motivates perpetrators (see Dojčinović 2020a, 2012a), and this complements social science research demonstrating that language motivates perpetrators only if it coheres with their already held ideological views (Juergensmeyer 2022, p. 8). Put simply, speech crime trials show that propaganda is an element of ideology and a critical bridge between worldviews and violence (Badar and Florijančić 2021), and while ideology is necessary for propaganda and persecution, it is not sufficient for the latter (Oberschall 2012, pp. 172–75). Only certain types of propaganda instigate violence; namely, narratives that justify violence based on direct threats, past atrocities, victimization, justice, revenge, religion, nationalism, negative outgroup stereotyping, and dehumanization (Kiper et al. 2020; Oberschall 2006, 2012).

Still, the above inference requires further justification. The minimal causal role of ideology, according to analyses of speech crimes, is based on empirical studies of perpetrators

(e.g., [Atran 2010](#); [Fujii 2011](#)). Now, perpetrators constitute a remarkably small percentage of any community, and that is especially true for religions. Most religious adherents are nonviolent, even though they may show inclinations for perceiving their tradition and ingroup positively and those of outgroups negatively. Doing so is likely the result of ingroup biases that function to reduce anxiety ([Harmon-Jones et al. 1996](#)), instill a sense of stability ([Calogero et al. 2009](#)), and promote ingroup trust ([Norenzayan and Gervais 2013](#)).⁶ On the other hand, perpetrators of intergroup violence—whether religious or not—tend towards authoritarian aggression ([Weise et al. 2012](#)), social dominance ([Henry et al. 2005](#)), and heightened prejudices for outgroups ([Hall et al. 2010](#)). Aside from the power of the situation (e.g., [Browning 2017](#); [Zimbardo 2008](#)), most perpetrators are also motivated by sacred values and identity fusion. Sacred values are practices, objects, or lands that a group is unwilling to exchange or abandon regardless of the benefits or costs ([Atran 2021](#), p. 478). Identity fusion occurs when people see their individual and group identities as equivalent due to powerful bonding experiences such as initiation rituals, emotionally intense team sports, or shared traumatic experiences ([Reese and Whitehouse 2021](#), p. 1). When identity fuses, these people are more willing than most people to engage in extreme behaviors. Moreover, when combined with sacred values, identity fused people become *devoted actors* who are disposed and prepared to mobilize for collective action to defend their sacred values, often by sacrificing themselves or others ([Atran 2016](#), p. 192). Accordingly, in most cases, intense bonding experiences, such as painful initiation rituals into violence cadres, fuse individuals into groups of devoted actors who are willing to perpetrate violence ([Kiper and Sosis 2021, 2018](#); [Alcorta and Sosis 2013](#); [Whitehouse 2021](#)).

Be that as it may, people support or engage in violence only if they find it meaningful (e.g., [Lauwaert et al. 2019](#)), and herein lies a tension. Most research to date does not address the meaningfulness of religious hate propaganda for communities but rather begs the question by reducing it to ideology. Religious adherents are said to engage in violence because of beliefs that stem from political ideology and frame violence as necessary, justified, or transcendental (e.g., [Atran 2021, 2016](#)). However, post-conflict ethnographies on perpetrators find that most engage in violence not because of beliefs, but rather because of social pressure exercised by village elders, relatives, or friends who shame them into violence (e.g., [Kiper 2018](#); [Hinton 2005](#); [Li 2004](#); [Mironko 2007](#); [Fujii 2011](#); [Straus 2007](#)). Ideology could influence the thinking of those who exercise pressure on would-be perpetrators ([Kiper 2015b](#)), but for people who voluntarily perpetrate violence, ideology is only significant after forging group commitments through shared rituals, which render violence meaningful (e.g., [Alcorta and Sosis 2013](#); [Whitehouse 2021](#)). Hence, the rather popular claim that violent perpetration results from ideologies is rather under supported by extant evidence; if anything, it is ritual that drives violence and gives it meaning (see also [Xygalatas 2022](#)).

To be sure, studies over the last decade have found that ideological manipulation is an outdated view, once known as the hypodermic needle theory of behaviorists ([Kiper 2015a](#); [Wilson 2017](#)). Contrary to this outlook, most people exercise a considerable degree of what is known as *epistemic vigilance*; they are not blind followers of ideology but rather evaluate information by relying on cues of trustworthiness, informational likelihood, and theory of mind (e.g., [Mercier 2017](#)). Along these lines, most audiences recognize inflammatory speech, blatant misinformation, and absurd conspiracies, but remarkably they often support it anyway because it strengthens their coalitions ([Boyer 2022](#); [Petersen 2020](#)). According to [Petersen \(2020\)](#), seemingly manipulative mass media, such as information campaigns propagating conspiracy theories, build coalitions by increasing group commitments around inflammatory content that functions as a signal, around which like-minded individuals can convey their allegiances. In other words, the conspicuously outrageous claims of a propagandist can serve as badges for an ingroup to communicate their group commitments and trustworthiness to one another; that is, as a hard-to-fake signal (or honest signal that communicates the commitment of the individual; see [Iannaccone 1992](#); [Zahavi 1977](#)). If so, then religious hate propaganda could work towards the same ends: as a means of

overcoming collective action problems by serving as badges of commitment that are too difficult to support unless people were truly committed to the authority and ingroup.

Yet, few studies have investigated whether hate propaganda in particular maintains these signaling functions or coalitional meanings (for an exception of how misinformation has failed in some violent regimes such as the Nazis, see [Mercier 2017](#)). This epistemic gap is significant because, again, courts focus almost exclusively on linguistic content that presumably influences perpetrators by triggering their ideologies. However, as the above points suggest, perpetrators are often influenced less by ideologies and far more by external conditions, collective responses to those conditions, and, in turn, coalitional psychology. If courts continue to overlook these factors, they may be missing something fundamental about hate propaganda. Moreover, no study to date has examined the concepts of costly signaling, coalition-building, and meaning with respect to religious hate propaganda. Thus, an under investigated question (expressed here in terms of current propaganda studies; see [Stanley 2015](#)) is how religious hate propaganda works, or more precisely, how it becomes meaningful for religious adherents.

5. Dangerous Accusations

Although the above question is an empirical one, it requires a theoretical basis; to that end, there is a defining feature of religious hate propaganda that often gets overlooked. For sake of clarity, I shall give it a name: *dangerous accusations*. Dangerous accusations portray a targeted other as capable of mystical harm and those accusations are countenanced by authorities through cultural processes of ritualized veridiction. My goal in this section is to elucidate this definition.

As a point of departure, accusations themselves are universal and powerful human activities that interrupt the flow of daily life by rendering another as the subject of blame for some wrongdoing and, in a culturally local manner, calling them to account ([Pavlich and Unger 2016](#), p. 3). Though innocuous, accusations can become dangerous whenever the social identity of the accused carries negative associations in the collective imaginary ([Pavlich 2018](#), p. 111). In that event, the accuser and audience are liable to adopting prejudicial outlooks such as associating the other with crimes, misfortunes, or past wrongdoings ([Chernobrov 2019](#), p. 349).

Even so, the defining characteristic of a dangerous accusation is the implication that the accused is capable of mystical harm. Drawing from a long tradition in anthropology (e.g., [Stein and Stein 2017](#)), mystical harm encompasses the complementary set of harms that are considered unnatural or unexplainable in relatively objective sense with regard to the culture in question ([Evans-Pritchard 1937](#); [Needham 1978](#)). Put formally, mystical harm is an injury attributable to a hidden cause, most commonly a spiritual symbol, occult practice, or person wielding malevolent forces ([Boyer 2022](#); [Singh 2021](#)). Unlike other intergroup anxieties (e.g., [Stephan and Stephan 1985](#)), mystical harm is more than the mere perception of group threats and involves the belief in violence magically caused by others, which can drive collective action under certain conditions, as discussed below.

Based on [Singh's \(2021\)](#) recent survey of magical explanations, mystical harm encompasses three striking similarities across cultures. First, it bridges misfortunes to supposed powers of the other in the minds of adherents ([Schimmelpfennig and Muthukrishna 2021](#), p. 20). Respectively, this may include plagues or economic losses and the supernatural abilities of the other such as the following: transforming into spiritual or animal forms; magical practices such as sorcery, the occult, or foreign rituals; and faculties that can injure from a distance ([Singh 2021](#), pp. 5–6). Remarkably, the power to harm others by mystical means is often unbeknown to the accused ([Stein and Stein 2017](#), p. 233). Mystical harmers can allegedly injure others by doing as little as staring oddly, seeming to bear ill will, or overstepping socially prescribed roles ([Singh 2021](#), p. 6).

Second, mystical harm is existentially threatening ([Singh 2021](#), p. 3). The logic here follows from the presumption that the targeted other possesses mysterious powers relative to the ingroup. From the prejudicial mindset of the accuser and the accuser's audience, if

the other bears an identity that is responsible for prior crimes or wields malevolent forces, then the other is not only capable of harming again but also threatening the ingroup's very lifeways (Annus 2020; Sullivan et al. 2012). This may explain why witchcraft—a quintessential form of dangerous accusations—is most associated with communities who believe in mystical forces and maintain high-rates of jealousy, antisocial attitudes, and distrust for others (Gershman 2016, p. 183). The complex of shared emotions that accompany such accusations stems from a perceived deficiency in social justice, usually due to weak formal political or legal systems, which is a critical factor for collective violence in general (Koning 2013, p. 162).

Third, mystical harm implies moral repugnance (Singh 2021, p. 3). In traditional societies, people associated with mystical harm, such as sorcerers, possessors of the evil eye, and witches, are associated with abhorrent acts (Singh 2021, p. 1). Yet, the same is true for groups on the fringes of modern society who are routinely subject to accusations of conspiracies. Collective beliefs about mystical harm are entangled with rumors of the other preying on children, destroying crops, controlling the economy, conspiring to wipeout others, or spreading a disease (Annus 2020; Chong and Druckman 2007). According to many social theorists (Chernobrov 2019, p. 350; Gershman 2016, p. 184), these associations, though disturbing, may serve a function. They are likely to justify the accusers' jealousy, contempt, and calls for retribution against the accused, who is more often than not a scapegoat for society's ills (Bivins 2008; Girard 1989; Taylor 2007).

In a similar way, anthropologists have suggested that allegations of mystical harm may reinforce social conformity by calling out anti-social behavior (Kluckhohn 1970; Platteau 2014; Posner 1980). This transpires most frequently in contexts where formal political institutions are weak but informal political connections are strong. For example, when a community lacks an independent judiciary, mystical harm may work as a cultural institution for encouraging social conformity through collective fear; namely, fear of mystical affliction but also accusations of mystical harm (see Boyer 2022; Singh 2021). Consequentially, mystical harms would strengthen ingroup cohesion in such contexts, but often at the cost of subjecting vulnerable people to injustices.

Indeed, witchcraft is widely believed to function as its own judicial system in small-scale societies, where it promotes social equality and economic leveling effects by calling out offensive, antisocial, or selfish behaviors (Gershman 2016, p. 198). In peasant traditions of Franconia, for example, witchcraft enforced social justice prior to, and even alongside, formal legal systems well into the early modern period (Sebald 1986). Closer to the present, apostacy charges have intensified in Islamic communities in the wake of extended wars, social uprisings, and revolutions (Badar and Florijančić 2021; Thompson 2022). While both witchcraft and apostacy seem to function in place of liberal justice mechanisms, they achieve social conformity by harming vulnerable people. According to the United Nations Human Rights Council (2021), witchcraft accusations are commonly levelled against LGBTQ+ people, poor women and children, and refugees, resulting in numerous human rights violations and, in many cases, extrajudicial killings (Dehm and Millbank 2018, p. 202). Similarly, people accused of apostacy (takfir) in Islamic communities are subject to physical abuse and murder (Badar and Florijančić 2021, p. 484).

Still, mystical harm becomes dangerous when countenanced by an authority. Across cultures, if an accusation is made, it often involves an authority who plays the part of arbiter but also gatekeeper; specifically, of avowals or speech acts during rituals of veridiction. Drawing from Foucault (2014), Pavlich (2016) explains that avowals are powerful speech acts akin to declaratives but differing in an important sense. Where declaratives change social reality in accord with a rite of passage, avowals separate the known from the unknown in accord with ritualized veridiction (Pavlich 2016, pp. 231–33). As an illustration, in the Roman Catholic Sacrament of Penance, forgiveness is declared by the priest, but is preceded by avowals regarding one's own sins, which are made true by virtue of confessing to the priest; namely, the authority overseeing the ritual process. Similarly, criminal trials are rituals that conclude with a declared judgment, but they are preceded by the avowals of

witnesses under oath, whose testimony is held true because it is recognized by a judge, otherwise it is expunged from the court. An avowal, then, is any speech act that is considered true because it occurred within—and was born out of—a ritual of veridiction. The latter is any formal space, event, or document that is presided over by a culturally recognized authority who bears witness to the process and the socially recognized truthfulness of its claims (Foucault 2014, p. 15; as cited by Pavlich 2016, p. 231).

Returning to accusations, cultures empower certain authorities to mediate, arbitrate, adjudicate, or preside over the ritual process to restrict potential conflicts between parties (Pavlich 2007, 2018) and verify speech acts therein, including judgments. In so doing, the authority participates in a ritual of veridiction—or a ritualized veridiction if the act itself is not a formal ritual but takes on the semblance of such. Such rituals or ritualized events follow a cultural script that varies cross-culturally but bears the same form: evaluating accusations, accepting speech acts as avowals, and declaring a decision (Antaki 2016, p. 44). Thus, when an accusation ensues in most communities, the parties enter a ritual or process of ritualized veridiction, wherein they are betwixt and between social identities (e.g., innocence and guilt, inclusion and exclusion, and reward and punishment) that are decided by an authority (Pavlich and Unger 2016, pp. 1–3).

Authorities therefore play an important part in accusations, and this is especially true in cases of mystical harm as evidenced by the role of oracles and witchdoctors during witchcraft allegations (Evans-Pritchard 1937, p. 113; see also Gershman 2016; Parren 2017) and imams throughout apostacy charges (Badar and Florijančić 2021, p. 488). These authorities approve of allegations as well as evidence and, through a relative process of judgment, establish social truths and sanction punishments (Pavlich 2016, pp. 231–33). However, if the harm inflicted on the accused is not limited or scrutinized by political safeguards, then authorities can weaponize accusations (Singh 2021, p. 13). For an authority can recognize baseless accusations against the vulnerable, render rumors or conspiracy theories as avowals, and convey approval for culturally sanctioned violence (Pavlich 2018, pp. 47–53). Indeed, abusive authorities who countenance spiraling accusations of mystical harm are part of the regular course of events during witch hunts, moral panics, and social scapegoating (e.g., Fass 1977; Romano 2016; Victor 1993). Still, as I will show in Section 7, an authority may function as an accuser and propagator of mystical harm beliefs, but it is the ritual of veridiction that functions as the vehicle of meaning for adherents.

6. Religious Hate Propaganda as a Dangerous Accusation

Based on what has been said, religious hate propaganda is a dangerous accusation. Whether it concerns the religious hate propaganda against Bosnians, Tutsis, or Rohingya, the core narrative in each case originated with rumors or conspiracy theories that, in the hands of cultural authorities and other trusted sources of information, were propagated to push an audience towards persecution. Most importantly, the propaganda centered on beliefs in mystical harm, where the targeted other was repeatedly depicted as morally repugnant and an existential threat, manifesting an uncanny malice towards the ingroup, including its women and children as well as its sacred values. Once propagated, these allegations gained traction in environments where the rule of law was considerably weakened, thus indicating that a critical factor in dangerous speech is the environment in which it is propagated.

Critical to religious hate propaganda are the conditions in which accusations against the targeted other are made. In most traditional societies, avowals—again, speech acts made true by formalities or customary practices—occur in public rituals of veridictions that, historically speaking, actually preceded and served as the steppingstones for the development of formal criminal procedures (Pavlich 2018). In most contemporary societies, however, an authority successfully propagates hate speech from sacred spaces, political platforms, or publications that are trusted by the community, by which the audience commits to the apparent importance of the information (Foucault 2014, pp. 16–24; Pavlich 2018, pp. 48–53). In these situations, the audience presumes that because accusations

against a targeted other are overseen by trusted cultural authorities, they exercise what I have described as veridiction; they are socially accepted because of the process and role of the authority. This does not mean the audience believes that the information is necessarily true, but rather that it is a social fact, which the audience should accept and to which they should collectively commit. As a result, an authority today can, through mass communication and the blurring of formal and informal boundaries of authoritative communication, render accusations against a targeted other as avowals, and likewise empower the authority's very own judgments against the accused as culturally sanctioned. The latter need not be explicit but instead an implicit speech act which conveys to the audience that the other deserves punishment such as ostracism, discrimination, or more violent forms of social exclusion.

7. Cognitive Foundations, Coalitional Significance, and Meaning-Making

The observation that religious hate propaganda is a dangerous accusation explains how such propaganda becomes meaningful. If an authority repeats and thereby recognizes allegations of mystical harm against a targeted other, doing so would communicate threats with moral implications to an audience who, depending on the environment, would eventually interpret them as socially accepted truths. Nevertheless, propaganda's connection to mystical harm provides additional explanations from CSR. For the cognitive foundations of religious hate propaganda and mystical harm are linked by what I have described as dangerous accusations and ritual veridictions. By examining these foundations, I hope to shed further light on how religious hate propaganda becomes meaningful for some religious communities.

I say "some" because longstanding dangerous accusations, such as witch hunts, occur more regularly in some environments rather than others (Annus 2020; Gershman 2016; Koning 2013). First, they transpire in societies after crop failures, economic downturns, or disease outbreaks when scapegoating is most likely (Koning 2013, pp. 411–12; see also Girard 1989). Second, they take hold in communities that incentivize warrior traditions and intergroup competition for resources, where people are sensitive to outgroup threats (Kruger 2021, p. 115; see also Van Vugt 2009). Third, religious communities perceiving a loss of social capital, prestige, rank, or extinction will be more prone to religious hate propaganda than others, insofar as perceptions of such constitute crises that are easily scapegoated onto the other (Culbert 2016, p. 154). Finally, histories of intergroup conflict intensify ideological investments in cultural traditions and religious values, thereby making scapegoating more likely during social crises (Boyer 2021, pp. 567–69).

From an evolutionary perspective, religious hate propaganda in these environments would induce threat biases that function to regulate anxieties (Holbrook 2016, p. 81). Specifically, in response to perceived threats, repeat exposure to religious hate propaganda would trigger unconscious attempts at compensatory control in the form of holding strongly to traditional values and increasing vigilance for potentially threatening others such as free riders (Blaine and Boyer 2018; Fessler et al. 2017). By exaggerating threats, religious hate propaganda would in turn exacerbate cognitive shifts that occur in threatening environments, including increased conservatism (Jost 2017, p. 167), paranoia (Koning 2013, p. 158), and the need for social solidarity (Douglas 1970, 1993). In so doing, it would activate the behavioral immune system (BIS) and thus a suite of emotions and instinctive, reactionary behaviors that normally protect individuals from pathogens or even pathogenic ideas (e.g., Schaller 2006; van Leeuwen and Petersen 2018). However, religious hate propaganda would channel disgust reactions and vigilance against pathogenic ideas at the targeted other, who, as a scapegoat, would induce a validated sense of precaution and personal agency in the ingroup (Landry et al. 2022, p. 122).

Recent scholarship in CSR also shows that highly emotional words activate the BIS (Giner-Sorolla and Russell 2019). This suggests that inflammatory language of religious hate propaganda would indeed heighten vigilance towards a targeted other (Taylor 2007, p. 3) and increase the need for social solidarity with an identifiable ingroup to counter

perceptual threats (e.g., Douglas 1993). The result would include heightened vigilance for signs of ingroup loyalty (Kruger 2021, pp. 111–15), which is evident in recent experimental studies demonstrating that exposure to hate propaganda increases ingroup association and outgroup disassociation (Kiper et al. 2020; Reeve 2021).

Turning to mystical harm, religious hate propaganda often includes rumors that a targeted other is behind an expansive if not global conspiracy, controlling everything from markets to the weather to claims that the other's very identity is inherently harming to others (Sullivan et al. 2012, p. 778). Bound up with these beliefs are the social psychology of scapegoating (Bivins 2008; Girard 1989), interreligious histories of conflict (Armstrong 2014; Baker 2017), symbolic purity and pollution (Douglas 1970), and apocalypticism (Boyer 1994). While I do not have the space to pursue these in detail, I should stress that they are often used by authorities to move audiences towards religious persecution. However, I wish to suggest that their force derives from underlying dangerous accusations. From Salem to satanic ritual abuse, antisemitism, and Islamophobia, the common thread to religious persecution are dangerous accusations that follow a similar course of action in environments where they are not enervated by local justice mechanism. In the aforementioned cases, they began with strong emotions fueling a "scare" of a vast secret conspiracy whose purpose was purely subversive and potentially apocalyptic. The focus was identification of the adversaries of society, with investigations spiraling as those identified were pressured to implicate others. They all focused on purity and unity and showed an intense occupation with loyalty (Stein and Stein 2017, p. 246).

Religious hate propaganda—as a process from rumor to ritualized veridictions—provides for the scare, conspiracy, spiraling accusations, and investigations. In so doing, it proffers shared meaning insofar as it identifies the source for societal evils and offers a course of action for resolving them.

Regarding propagation, recent scholarship in CSR suggests that propaganda spreads across a population not because people believe its claims, but rather because sharing it benefits recipients. What findings in CSR indicate, which is a contribution to research on dangerous speech, is that audiences may share counterintuitive and threatening messages because doing so leads to reputational payoffs (Boyer 2022). After all, sharing potentially threatening information increases one's reputation, since sharing it signals concern for the ingroup (Boyer and Parren 2015; Parren 2017). Furthermore, if the information is potentially serious or occupies the attention economy of the audience, as would happen when an authority repeated an accusation, it would provide the means for tracking ingroup alliances. After all, the more outrageous the propaganda becomes, the more it can function as a hard-to-fake badge of group membership, since it acts as a mode of commitment, not belief (Petersen 2020). The logic here is no different from any other costly signal; because sharing or supporting outrageous conspiracies or vitriolic language is costly, it is something that only those who committed to the ingroup would support. Equally as important, people who rejected the propaganda would be seen as suspect, without having sufficient ingroup commitment (Parren 2017, pp. 409–10). At one point, the growth of the coalition would also tip the greater community to feigning support, which would happen if community leaders and gatekeepers of social opportunities felt pressure to support the propaganda and pressured others to do the same. Accordingly, religious hate propaganda can take a dangerous path: from rumor to spiraling accusations and transforming over time into what Petersen (2020) describes as a source for cue-tracking, group membership marking, and eventually feigning support to avoid ostracism.

Yet, critical to religious hate propaganda becoming a source of instigation is an authority who countenances false accusations of mystical harm. If supporting the authority's accusation signals group membership (Jordan et al. 2016) and appropriates a targeted other as the source of societal ills, then the accusation serves also to demarcate an assumed order posed by the ingroup and disorder represented by the outgroup (Jost 2017, p. 169). Such is the power and danger of accusations when made by an authority:

[The] accusation defines an absence and simultaneously renders a specific vision of the common good, the order, present. It presents what a relational setting aspires to lack, a deliberated absence that simultaneously constitutes associations ... the naming of absence fabricates the porous, and plural–singular, limits of constantly reiterated, permeable and dynamic images of orders ... [The] accusation is ... directed at securing by designating criminal otherness. (Pavlich 2007, p. 95)

Indeed, at the heart of religious hate propaganda is an accusation used by an authority to render order among a community at the cost of a targeted other. Additionally, therein lies a danger often overlooked by courts. Through acts of ritualized veridictions, notions of mystical harm, such as conspiracy theories or claims that the other's very being causes widespread violence, can become explicit avowals and provide ingroup authorities with a *monstrum*. That is, a culturally constructed monster that stands opposed to the ingroup's traditions, but who is nevertheless criminalized by them, and in so doing preserves the impression of order posed by the ingroup's ways of life (Bivins 2008, p. 78).

Accordingly, authorities are critical for dangerous accusations, but it is the act of ritualized veridiction that ultimately makes accusations meaningful. To see why, consider that an accusation of mystical harm involves counterintuitive content that is often difficult even for the ingroup to rationalize, yet adherents accept it anyway (Boyer 2022; Petersen 2020). This is done not in spite of ritual but precisely because of it. When counterintuitive content integrates with other cognitive capacities, such as intuitive ontology and cognitive biases, it is attention-demanding and memorable (Boyer 1994, p. 35). Thus, it can afford a conspicuous hard-to-fake signal for ingroup commitments (e.g., Petersen 2020) and easily remembered practices during the ritual process (Evens 1996).

To illustrate further, consider E.E. Evans-Pritchard's (1937) famous case study of oracles and Azande witchcraft. When observing why the Zande accept witchcraft accusations, Evans-Pritchard comments that "The Zande actualizes beliefs rather than intellectualizes them ... [T]heir ideas are imprisoned in action and cannot be cited to explain and justify action" (1937, p. 82–83). In other words, the Zande are not irrational but instead, similar to most ritual participants, are concerned more with performing the ritual rather than intellectualizing its underlying content (Evens 1996, p. 30). Put another way, the counter-intuitive content behind witchcraft accusations, such as the existence of witches and oracular divination, are not matters of theory but of practice (Evens 1996, p. 31). Counterintuitive content and ritual combine to reinforce group commitments, enforce social levelling, and reaffirm the social order (Rappaport 1999). Hence, the ritual process not only gives authorities the power to declare judgments but renders counter-intuitive content with practical efficacy.

The same is true for religious hate propaganda. When a religious authority accuses a targeted other of polluting society and encourages adherents to harass or harm the accused, that authority is not unlike the Zande oracle (though far more violent). Similar to the oracle, the authority uses the religious system to scapegoat, find fault through spectral evidence, and use the ritual process to verify accusations, validate judgments, and direct adherents in collective action. Furthermore, the religious authority is the mouthpiece for justifications while the ritual is the technology for mounting collective action and forging shared understandings. Taken together, religious hate propaganda can make dangerous accusations and make subsequent persecution a meaning-making act for religious communities.

Thus, what courts routinely miss in cases of religious hate propaganda is twofold. First, religious hate propaganda centers on dangerous accusations. Second, the dangerous accusation behind most religious hate propaganda is ostensibly about the alleged wrongdoings of a targeted other, but implicitly about collective action and following the ingroup's way of life (see also Dehm and Millbank 2018; Klocek et al. n.d.). Through ritualized veridiction, dangerous accusations define and bond the ingroup around representations that maintain ingroup identity (e.g., Tajfel and Turner 1986). Identification with, and acceptance by, an ingroup is one of the most important dimensions that individuals evaluate their personal selves (Sullivan et al. 2012, p. 778); therefore, people in a religious community would feel

compelled to avoid violating group norms and strive to appear prosocial (Reniers et al. 2012). Given this much, religious hate propaganda would promote social conformity and pressures to support, or at least not buck the status quo, of the authority promoting it and the followers propagating it (Wang et al. 2021, p. 1). In the end, religious hate propaganda is more than just ideology and has the power, if left unabated, to foment persecution of targeted others.

8. Conclusions

In this article, I drew from research on speech crimes in human rights and the efficacy of mystical harm and cognitive biases to break new ground in the study of religious hate propaganda. I argued that in most cases, authorities use expressive modalities from the local religious system to effectively convey allegations of mystical harm. These allegations are often made dangerous by authorities who form ritualized veridiction to represent accusations against a targeted other as socially accepted claims, around which adherents can signal their ingroup loyalties. Yet, these accusations become most dangerous when repeated by authorities in cultural contexts where the rule of law is relatively unreliable (Leeson 2011, p. 18).

Nevertheless, whether we are talking about secular or religious hate propaganda, it is neither ideology nor religious beliefs themselves that cause violence, but instead the conditions that render accusations meaningful and attacks on others as justifiable, while at the same time silencing fellow adherents who may not support persecution. Here, I showed how this becomes possible: the path goes from dangerous accusations to audiences adopting such accusations as hard-to-fake badges of group membership and related commitments that can exercise pressures on others to conform with spiraling accusations.

It has not escaped my attention, however, that my account differs from most theories on the dangers of propaganda. For instance, Arendt famously explained that the banality of evil is caused, in part, not by doctrine, as I have argued, but rather the inability for audiences to think (Arendt 1963, p. 423; as cited in Culbert 2016, p. 156). Hate propaganda, according to Arendt, stultifies the activity of thinking for oneself, which is vital to society. Though I agree with Arendt that thinking deeply about information acts as a purging element removing unhelpful or destructive ideas from culture, I disagree that the dangers of propaganda are confined to an unthinking populace. Instead, the dangers of propaganda are first and foremost authorities who use dangerous accusations to their advantage and, secondly, audiences who, despite epistemic vigilance, adopt dangerous accusations as hard-to-fake signals of ingroup loyalty. Accordingly, violence resulting from religious hate propaganda is due not to ideology, or the lack of thinking for that matter, but conditions that render dangerous accusations as meaningful badges, explanations, and modes of justice that are achieved by violating the rights of a targeted other. In these conditions, religious hate propaganda increases the likelihood that attacks on others are justifiable and realizable, while the voices that would otherwise object to persecutory violence are silenced.

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Notes

- ¹ The prohibition of hate propaganda and war propaganda, though widely debated, is nonetheless consistent across human rights instruments. These include the equal protection clause under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR; [United Nations 1948](#)); Article 20 of the ICCPR; Article 13 of American Charter for Human Rights (ACHR; [Organization of American States 1969](#)); and Article 4 of the International Covenant on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD; [United Nations 1969](#)) (for a review, see [Timmermann 2005](#)).
- ² Summarizing over a decade of research in CSR, [Purzycki and Sosis \(2022\)](#) use the concept of the religious system to capture the many reductive features analyzed by the evolutionary and cognitive sciences of religion but also to bridge these many reductive analyses with the notions of cultural evolution, emergence, and historical expressions of so-called “religions” in cross-cultural contexts in the social sciences and humanities. Accordingly, the religious system is taken as the prototype or model of religion, which includes (not in an Aristotelian sense of necessary and sufficient conditions but in a Wittgensteinian sense of family resemblance) cognitive constituents, such as mental content, psychological functions, and behavioral patterns; the building blocks of shared religious behaviors (viz. authorities, meanings, moral obligations, myths, rituals, sanctities, supernatural agents, and taboos); and collective manifestations of religious practices that involve cohesion and coordination. It is important to note that the upshot of the religious system model is that it is flexible enough to capture “religions” that often defy traditional Aristotelian definitions, such as those that define religion as, say, “belief in god(s)”, and thus exclude traditions and ways of life such as Theravada Buddhism. This religious system model prevents such problems and is arguably the most pragmatic and extended definition of religion ([Sosis 2020](#), p. 148).
- ³ Acquittals along these lines have occurred in anti-LGBTQ+ cases. Respectively, they were *Prosecutor v Ake Green, Whatcott v Sask, Lund v Boisson, and Owens v Saskatchewan*. Similar dismissals have occurred with misinformation campaigns targeting Muslims as terrorists (*Norwood v United Kingdom*) and threats to Western civilization itself (*R. v Harding*), even though sensitivity to prohibiting Islamophobia has increased in Europe (for a review, see [Doering and Peker 2022](#); [Vrieling 2013](#)). What is more, despite laws in sixteen countries that prohibit Holocaust denial (see [Moon 2018](#)), anti-Semitic propaganda—including longstanding tropes of global conspiracies—remain largely protected if grounded in religious belief.
- ⁴ An exceptional case that considered religious hate propaganda, as well as other facets of hate speech, was the prosecution of Hasan Ngeze at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). Before the Rwandan genocide, Ngeze, a prominent journalist authored the notorious *Hutu Ten Commandments*, which he published in the newspaper Kangura, a progovernment Hutu news source. The “commandments” delineated ten rules for Hutus to cut off all relations with Tutsis, regardless of whether they were friends or family. Framed in Christian imagery, the “commandments” portrayed Tutsis as inferior foreigners whose women were inherently manipulative and bewitching of men, while Tutsi men were ungodly and naturally traitorous. By publishing these claims alongside other progovernment and Christian rhetoric, Ngeze depicted Tutsi persecution as a necessary and even justifiable religious way of dealing with the ongoing threats posed by Tutsis, which were later echoed by genocidaires. In the end, Ngeze was convicted for inciting genocide, and expert witnesses and observers of the case described the *Hutu Ten Commandments* as increasing the likelihood and imminence of genocidal violence ([Melvern 2004](#), p. 49; [Power 2002](#), pp. 337–38).
- ⁵ After the ICTR, research on hate propaganda and speech crimes accelerated. A major turning point came in 1998, when the Hutu propagandist Jean-Paul Akayesu was convicted of inciting genocide for a speech he gave in Taba, Rwanda (for a summary, see [Kiper 2015a](#)). In his trial judgment, the presiding judges declared that to prove that hate propaganda was the source of mass atrocity crimes, “there must be proof of a possible causal link” between the propagandist’s messages and ensuing violence, otherwise the former cannot be said to have caused the latter (paragraph 349). Although Akayesu and subsequent legal judgments established causality through the timing of the propaganda and subsequent violence ([Benesch 2012](#), p. 257) as well as mental fingerprints connecting the propagandist’s messages and the perpetrators’ motivation or justifications ([Dojčinović 2020a](#)), scholars outside of prosecuting cases have aimed for something more rigorous.
- ⁶ For instance, predispositions to view outgroups negatively generally result from confirmation bias, by which adherents—or members of any group—pay attention to token evidence that supports their group’s beliefs ([Čavojova et al. 2018](#)).

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