

Jewish—Christian Dialogue focus of recent psychological, sociological perspectives on Holocaust violence

By Perilla A. Wilson

MOBILE—Dr. Murry Mutchnick, professor at Spring Hill College, acknowledged the strongly held position that the world must not forget the atrocities of World War II. However, he feels that psychology needs to “take it a little further” and consider if a grown man can injure a total stranger just because he is told to do so. This was the theme of his lecture at a Jewish/Christian Dialogue event held at Spring Hill College’s Byrne Hall. The title of his talk was “The Anatomy of Destruction and Good: Psychological perspectives on the Nazis, Heroes and Ourselves.”

Mutchnick, holder of a doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Tennessee, also explored the idea that third graders can learn to hate each other in fifteen minutes, that college students could be made to feel inferior in the length of a class period, and that Rescuers who did heroic things were not highly unique. He examined the challenges to personal belief systems, the unsettling nature of some ex-

periments and pointed out that these were meant to explain not to condone

He described evil as “intentionally planned, morally unjustified, injury to others,” and pointed out the strong power of some situations, that some people are pathologically evil persons by nature, and certain social situations lend themselves to evil action. Then he showed film clips of an experiment called “Jane Elliott’s Demonstration” from the 1960’s. It depicted a third grade class in Riceville, Ohio, who were divided by their teacher (the authority figure for them) into two groups – blue-eyed and brown-eyed children and then one group was given privileges and told they were superior and the others were told they were inferior and deprived of special treatment. In only fifteen minutes animosity between the groups was established.

In a second filmed experiment conducted by Mutchnick at Spring Hill College, he replicated the Elliott demonstration by dividing the class according to personal learning

styles—one group who worked by themselves or non-social and the other group classified as interactive social learners. The first group became more isolated and less productive from the demeaning treatment by the second group.

The next demonstration was the Stanford Prison Experiment of 1971 in which a mock prison was set up to show what can happen when you put good people in bad situations. The most normal students were picked and the ones who were “prisoners” were isolated. Nice boys became brutal “guards” and healthy “prisoners” became sick. Active “prisoners” became zombie-like, many being extremely stressed. What was to be a two-week experiment was called after only six days because “we all have the capacity to do evil – given the right situation.” Although there were no long term effects, they learned a lot about themselves and the power of the situation

Obedience to Authority was the theme of Stanley Milgram’s experiment on learning conducted in New Haven, Conn. at Yale Univ. in 1962. An electric

shock was administered for every missed word and the shocks were progressively more severe. The men taking the vocabulary test were aware of the experiment and faked reactions as no real shocks were administered. The men administering the test ranged in age from 20 to 50 years, were corporate executives to plumbers and some had not finished elementary school while others had doctorates. 62.5% followed instructions to continue administering the shocks to the end even though alarmed or concerned over the “students” reactions to the “shocks.” None of those who quit did so without getting the supervisor’s permission. The moral consideration of obedience to authority had a direct relation to the administrators’ actions. However, these experimenters were not sadistic as were the Nazis. Clinical research showed 37.5 % disoriented from authority

Mutchnick stressed that many of these types of experiments would not be allowed or tolerated today, notwithstanding the fact that research and

follow-up, especially of the third graders in Elliott’s demonstration, failed to find any ill effects over the long term. He did say that personality factors played a meaningful part in the actions of perpetrator of Holocaust violence. Research has found that many who were compliant had a obedience to authority personality, a lack of closeness to their fathers and were more likely to shoot during war. Prisoners of War were found to have average to superior IQ’s, were not sadistic and were not the same as the rank and file.

On the other side of the coin, Mutchnick pointed out that “even when the context is evil, there can be good.” Some who were not the “heroic type” were motivated by empathy to defy authority, e.g. Paul Greuninger, a Swiss Captain who defied his government. Rescuers had some common characteristics such as social responsibility, tolerance and empathy and although not highly unique, “under the same authority and influence, they did heroic things.” There are 21,728 Righteous Among the Gentiles!