

## Walter Zwi Bacharach on New Books about the Vatican and the Holocaust

Antisemitism, Holocaust and the Holy See:

An Appraisal of New Books About the Vatican and the Holocaust

Walter Zwi Bacharach

Since the publication of Saul Friedländer's pioneering study of Pius XII in 1964, much has been written about the attitude of the Catholic Church to the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> This review article will relate primarily to the body of research that has been published since 1999, with an emphasis on Catholic-Christian points of view as they have been interpreted by several scholars. The article will focus on fundamental Christian outlooks and the differing interpretations, not necessarily on each and every author and his/her interpretation. Moreover, since the issue at hand is the Catholic Church, clearly the pope's opinions and positions will be at the core of the discussion.

This article discusses research studies by Michael Phayer, Susan Zuccotti, John Cornwell, David Kertzer, and José M. Sanchez.<sup>2</sup> Since there is insufficient space for a detailed discussion, I will have to make do with a

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<sup>1</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Pie XII et le IIIe Reich, Documents* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1964); in English, *Pius XII and the Third Reich, A Documentation* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust 1930-1965* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000); Susan Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); José M. Sanchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust: Understanding the Controversy* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002); John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York: Viking, 1999); David Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2001).

general survey, while drawing attention to the principal conclusions reached by the authors regarding the matters under discussion.

## About the Books

Michael Phayer, a professor of history at Marquette University, presents a balanced picture of the case for and against Pope Pius XII's guilt. Phayer relies on new sources and declares that the pope's position on the Jews during the Holocaust should not simply be rejected out of hand; his actions should be judged on the basis of contemporary circumstances and realities. Phayer does not dwell solely on the pope's personality. He expands the discussion to the attitudes of the Catholic Church in general and points to the failure of the Church to defend the Jews.

Phayer focuses on "the silence of the pope" and explains it ambiguously. While his silence should be condemned insofar as the murder of the Jews, his failure to come to their aid stemmed from considerations unrelated to their fate. These included the fear of Communism, as well as his concerns for the physical survival of the city of Rome, diplomatic-political considerations that shunted aside his moral obligations. In his study Phayer tries diligently to avoid presenting a monolithic view of the Church and the papacy and seeks to consider the various factors that motivated the heads of the Church and its institutions to act as they did with regard to the Third Reich and the Jews.

Phayer surveys the attitudes of the Church toward the Jews between 1930 and 1965. He documents the evolution of these attitudes, ranging from

overall hostility to positive appreciation, and highlights the positive role played by Catholic women in encouraging a pro-Jewish approach among the Christian public.

Susan Zuccotti, who studied the history of the Holocaust in Italy, discusses in her book the position taken by the Vatican with respect to the Holocaust in Italy. Although the focus is on one particular country, Zuccotti assigns great importance to gaining an understanding of the policies of the Holy See in relation to all Jews. Like Phayer, Zuccotti is not interested in “releasing demons,” as she writes, but in distinguishing between fact and fiction. She also criticizes the pope for giving priority to diplomatic activity and for the deafening silence of Pius XII when it came to the oppression and murder of Jews.

As for the help and assistance rendered by the Vatican to Jews, Zuccotti examines the troubling question of whether the intention was to help Jews, converted Jews, or Jews who were married to Christians. In general, did the Pope know of or approve the aid extended by convents, church schools, and other institutions? Based on new documentation studied by Zuccotti, she asserts that a differentiation should be made between the activities of Catholic individuals--men and women--and those of the pope. Zuccotti says that the pope did not take part in rescue activities of Jews.

The importance of the book lies in the analogy that may be drawn from the policies of the Holy See with regard to the Jews of Italy to the attitude adopted with regard to Jews in the other occupied countries. If not enough was done by the pope for the Jews in the Italian homeland, what could one expect to find in other countries?

John Cornwell of Cambridge University is well known for his numerous published works on Catholic affairs. In the book before us, the author considers the activities of Pacelli well before he was chosen as pope. Thus, we have an opportunity to watch the evolution of his views throughout his diplomatic career, culminating in their final formulation when he was Pope Pius XII. Cornwell contends that Pius did not have an antisemitic outlook, but that he viewed Judaism and the Jews as the enemies of Christianity. Moreover, Judaism, which stands in opposition to the spirit of Christianity, was now joined by another enemy--Bolshevism.

Cornwell argues that the policies of the Holy See during the Nazi period, and primarily those of Pius, were intended to preserve the Church's independence and authority. The position taken by the Catholic Church and the Vatican, he says, should therefore be judged on the basis of this intent in nearly every subject, and the silence of the Holy See should be understood in this light. On this basis, Cornwell says that the pope was guided not by antisemitism per se, but rather by his "aspiration to holiness"; the wish to forge an identity between the person of faith and his loyalty to the pope engendered Pius's opposition to Judaism and Jews. The significance of Cornwell's analysis lies in his highlighting the long-standing Christian Jew-hatred and how it was emphasized.

David A. Kertzer, a professor of social sciences and anthropology at Brown University in the United States, wrote a study that is not exclusively about Pius XII, but engages in the difficult question of the role played by the Catholic Church in preparing the groundwork for the murder of the Jews during the Holocaust. The book focuses on the development of the Holy See's

antisemitism in the modern era, mainly from the nineteenth century to the outbreak of World War II. Kertzer argues that the intensive and exclusive preoccupation with Pius XII has eclipsed the anti-Jewish policies of the Holy See over the centuries. In his study Kertzer attempts to present a comprehensive picture of these policies. He considers the Church's generations-long opposition to modernism and the connection between modernism, Judaism and the Jews. Of special interest is the book's refutation of Christian apologetics, which sought to obscure the Church's responsibility for the bitter fate of the Jews.

José M. Sanchez, a professor of history at Saint Louis University in the United States, wrote a book of a different sort. Sanchez took an a priori tendentious approach, which was intended to clear Pius XII of all the allegations raised in the aforementioned studies. The Sanchez study is avowedly apologetic and eagerly defends all of the pope's actions, including his silence during the Holocaust. It is intended mainly as a polemic rebuttal to those who attack Pius. As Sanchez claims in the book, "What seems apparent is that all through the years of controversy, the critics of Pius... have tended to make their judgments less on the basis of an impartial reading of the documents than on their preconceived sentiments."<sup>3</sup>

On the basis of a thorough study of the scholarly works assessed in this review article, it is clear that the scholars based their conclusions on an impartial reading of the documentation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sanchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, p. 179. Another example of this sort of study is Ronald J. Rychlak, *Hitler, the War and the Pope* (Columbus: Genesis Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> After completing this article, I received the recent study by Daniel Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2002). The book is written *cum ira et studio*, similar to his problematic incendiary book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. More than being a research study, his book about the Church is a polemic

# Judaism-Christianity: The Controversy

The core of the controversy between Judaism and the Christian world--both Catholic and Protestant--derives from the Christian accusations that the Jews denied the messianism of Jesus and are guilty of his crucifixion. This serious accusation created and nurtured the negative stereotype of the Jew and determined the Jew's degraded, scorned status in the world. As James Parkes wrote:

What changed the normal pattern of Jewish-Gentile relations was the action of the Christian Church... There is no break in the line that leads from the start of condemnation of Judaism during the formative years of Christian history, to the exclusion of Jews from positions of civic equality at the time of the Church's first triumphs in the fourth century, and on through the horrors of the Middle Ages, to the Death Camps of Hitler in our own days.<sup>5</sup>

Over the generations prejudice against Jews struck root in the Christian consciousness. Was there any change in this consciousness after the

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primarily about moral judgment, which is devoid of balanced rational deliberation, as has already been stated by the historian Richard Evans in the *Jewish Chronicle*. The book adds nothing new to what has already been said in the works under discussion here.

<sup>5</sup> James Parkes, *Antisemitism* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1963), p. 60.

atrocities of the Holocaust in the twentieth century? Did the Church recognize its responsibility for the degradation of the Jew? Was there a shift in its theological position? What was the pope's stance toward the Jews before, during, and after the Holocaust? These questions, explicit or veiled, hover over any discussion of the position of the Catholic Church in our own period with regard to the fate of the Jews and their status in society.

There is a basic assumption in Christian theology regarding Jews, and I fear that it still exists, in spite of all the positive attempts made to enhance rapprochement and understanding between the two religions. This assumption received expression in the famous October 28, 1965, document by the Ecumenical Council, known as *Nostra Aetate*. The document states, in part: "Although the Church is the new People of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures."<sup>6</sup>

This is a fundamental theological position of the Church and seems to be still valid. Indeed, there has been a turnaround in the Church's attitude toward antisemitism, as reflected in statements made by Pope John Paul II in 1983.<sup>7</sup> But if Auschwitz symbolizes antisemitism, as the pope said, the question remains: what caused Auschwitz? The annulment of God's choice of the people of Israel in favor of His choice of "the new People of God" paved the way to the rejection of the Jewish people--according to Church policy--from the human community. The result was the demonization of the Jew,

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<sup>6</sup> Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith, Irena Steinfeldt, eds., *The Holocaust and the Christian World: Reflections on the Past, Challenges for the Future* (London: Beth Shalom Holocaust Memorial Centre and Yad Vashem, 2000), p. 247; the significance of this remark is discussed in my article "Christianity and Judaism: Polemic or Dialogue," *Bar-Ilan Studies in History*, vol. 2 (1983), p. 19.

<sup>7</sup>As they appear in the booklet, "The Visit of Pope John Paul II to Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, March 23, 2000" (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2000).

which, in turn, prepared the groundwork for Auschwitz. The Vatican faces a serious contradiction: on the one hand, it endorses the principle that God's choice of the Jewish people was annulled; on the other hand, it condemns the result--antisemitism.

However, the pope's comparison of Auschwitz-antisemitism should be further explained. In his emphasis on Auschwitz, the pope was referring to the *murder* of the Jews--their extermination, as the Nazis called it. Although the Church never sided with or preached on behalf of this goal, neither theologically nor practically, that does not mean that the Church did not harbor antisemitic attitudes or views that derived from its beliefs. Some have called this "anti-Judaism," as opposed to "antisemitism," but Kertzer refutes this argument in his book. This is not the place to quote his detailed arguments, but his conclusion should be noted:

As this book will show, the distinction made... between "anti-Judaism" ... and "anti-Semitism," which led to the horrors of the Holocaust, will simply not survive historical scrutiny (p. 6)... Yet if the Vatican never approved the extermination of the Jews – indeed, the Vatican opposed it (albeit quietly) – the teachings and actions of the Church, including those of the popes themselves, helped make it possible.<sup>8</sup>

The identity of the terms "anti-Judaism" and "antisemitism," as posed by Kertzer, is intended to point up the anti-Jewish ideology in the papal tradition. Kertzer illustrates this tradition primarily in the periods of the

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<sup>8</sup> David Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews*, pp. 6, 9.



nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most of his research concerns Christian antisemitism in the generations leading up to but not including the Holocaust. The book is not only about the role played by Pope Pius XII; it highlights the personal antisemitic and anti-Jewish religious ideology of the popes that preceded him--a tradition that contributed to the satanic image of the Jew, thereby paving the way to the Holocaust.

## Pius XII

Was Pope Pius XII, whose tenure corresponded with the critical years of the Holocaust, an antisemite? This question troubled all of the aforementioned scholars, and their respective answers determine how the pope's actions and policies toward the Nazis and the Jews should be interpreted. Based on their research, it seems that the pope did not like Jews for Christian reasons; however, it would be difficult to describe him as antisemitic. Cornwell called him "Hitler's Pope," but was he referring to Pius's antisemitism by this assignation? Phayer thinks so. "In his 1999 biography of Pius, 'Hitler's Pope,' John Cornwell pinned an even uglier face on Pius — that of an antisemite... These images of Pius XII miss the mark,"<sup>9</sup> writes Phayer.

However, Cornwell did not explicitly write that Pius was antisemitic. He characterizes Pius's attitude toward the Jews as a "secret antipathy" that had a religious and racist character. Yet this assessment is at odds with later

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<sup>9</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust*, p. xii.

claims regarding the respect he had for Jews and that his actions during the war, as well as his failures, ostensibly derived from only the best intentions.<sup>10</sup>

In his study Cornwell emphasizes that it was not antisemitism but Pius's "aspirations to holiness," his ambition to identify the People of God by its loyalty to the pope, that was the basis of his opposition to Judaism and Jews. This rejection of the Jew derived from his Christian outlook and, in Cornwell's opinion, prevented him from adopting a responsible position and identifying with the fate of the Jews.<sup>11</sup> Cornwell concurs with the other new studies that Pius XII was not antisemitic. What Cornwell calls the "aspirations to holiness" hints at the internal religious and spiritual world of the pope, which prevented him from recognizing the grave nature of the earthly events.

But why did the issue of a possible antisemitic bias on the part of the pope even arise? It seems that his positions, opinions, and actions toward the Jews during the period of the Third Reich were so vague, so disapproving, and so controversial that it would be reasonable to assume he had an antisemitic bias. But since this possibility has been ruled out by the new research studies, the question may be asked: What indeed was the source of Pius XII's complex and controversial attitude toward the Jews? Due to limitations of space, I cannot systematically review the policies of the pope and the Vatican. I will therefore focus on several main elements that will enable us to formulate a comprehensive picture.

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<sup>10</sup> Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, p. 295.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277. See also Zwi Bacharach in the volume, "A Pope With an Anti-Jewish Religious Approach," *Geshet – A Journal of Jewish Affairs* (Hebrew), 142 (Winter 2001), pp. 97-99.

In 1964, Pope Paul VI issued the *Ecclesiam suam*, which stated: “No one is a stranger to the heart of the Church ... All that is human touches us.”<sup>12</sup>

Did the fate of the Jews indeed touch Pius XII’s heart in a human way? In order to answer this question, we must first clarify how the pope, the Catholic establishment, and believing Catholics viewed the Jew, his religion and tradition. I referred above to the Christian principle concerning the Divine choice that had passed from the Jews to the “new people” and the resultant negative image of the Jewish people. This negative image was also etched into the consciousness of the popes. All of the research underscores the sense of discomfort--to say the least--of Pope Pius XII whenever there was a need to talk about Jews. The trend was not to mention them explicitly. The Pope’s Christmas message, delivered on December 24, 1942, provides an instructive example: “Humanity owes this vow to those hundreds of thousands, who through no fault of their own, and only by reason of their nationality or race, are marked down for death or progressive extinction.”

The victims of the Nazis were not mentioned by name. The word “Jew” was not mentioned, even though the Vatican and the pope knew what was happening to the Jews and that a horrible crime against humanity was taking place.<sup>13</sup> More than the other scholars, Cornwell emphasizes the traditional anti-Jewish theological perspective of the pope even during the period of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. Cornwell asserts that his ambition was to be

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<sup>12</sup> In the Afterword by the historian Alfred Grosser to the German edition of Friedlander’s book, *Pius XII und das Dritte Reich: ein Dokumentation* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1965), p. 167.

<sup>13</sup> Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews*, p. 16; Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows*, p. 1; Cornwell, *Hitler’s Pope*, pp. 291-293, 297; *Pius and the Third Reich*, pp. 130-133.

the pope of peace on earth--not as a neutral authority, but as the messenger of Jesus the King on earth.<sup>14</sup> This helps to explain his disregard for the Jews.

This disregard can also be explained in another fashion. The reason he neglected the Jewish issue extended beyond the Christian-religious experience that beat within him. Essentially, Pius XII lived in an unreal world. Spiritual fantasy had induced him to alienate himself from earthly reality.<sup>15</sup> The Christian idea, Cornwell persuasively contends, was in fact his reality. How did this disregard express itself in practice?

In a paraphrase of Paul VI's statement quoted above, it can be said about Pius XII that "the human is the diplomatic." In other words, his diplomatic approach and actions came at the expense of the moral obligation dictated by principles of the Christian faith. This lapse constituted a primary area of interest for the new research. In this spirit Phayer concludes his study, the bulk of which is devoted to the pope's diplomatic activities.

## The Silence of the Pope

It is now clear that the Holy See did not pass on the news it had about the Holocaust to the bishops in Germany. Konrad Preysing, the bishop of Berlin, asked the pope to speak up on the matter of the Holocaust. Pius replied that he did not want to mention all of the obstacles that the Americans were placing before Jews seeking safe haven in the United States. Phayer believes

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<sup>14</sup> Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, p. 223.

<sup>15</sup> Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows*, pp. 318-319.

this was an attempt by the pope to put the ball in the American court as a means of evading his own responsibility.<sup>16</sup>

The Holy See was pressed to explain his silence and offered hollow arguments, such as that every statement and every response by local clergymen are of course made with the pope's approval. This argument is untenable, since the Vatican and the pope did not pass on information to local church officials about what was happening in Europe. Nor is the argument that any intervention by the pope would only weigh heavier on the fate of the Jews altogether convincing.<sup>17</sup> The Jews were being murdered. What could weigh heavier than that?

Phayer believes that the pope's silence may be attributed to two reasons: (1) his interest in being the diplomatic peacemaker who would save Western Europe from the scourge of Communism; and (2) the Holy See's fears that Rome and the Vatican would be destroyed by the Nazis by aerial bombing.<sup>18</sup>

All of this implies severe criticism of the Holy See's actions. But long before Phayer's criticism, Saul Friedländer wondered about the pope's actions and asked:

How is it conceivable that at the end of 1943 the Pope and the highest dignitaries of the Church were still wishing for victorious resistance by the Nazis in the east and therefore seemingly accepted by implication

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<sup>16</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust*, pp. 51, 218.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

the maintenance, however temporary, of the entire Nazi extermination machine?<sup>19</sup>

It should be noted that Phayer's new research, based on new documentation, only reinforces Friedländer's early conclusions, which remain valid.

Nevertheless, if the pope was indeed concerned about the fate of the Vatican and sought to protect it from attack, why did he not raise his voice in protest after June 1944, by which time there was no longer any foreseeable danger to the Vatican? Susan Zuccotti asserts that the reasons extend beyond diplomatic considerations. In her opinion, "Most prelates of the Church, first of all, were suspicious of those who were Jewish by religion or culture." They considered them to be representatives of modernity, the enemies of a threatened and vulnerable Church.<sup>20</sup> The prelates, therefore, advocated differentiating between the Catholic victims and the Jews. As for the Jews, the Church leaders were prepared to turn a blind eye to the uniqueness of the fate that Nazi policy held in store for them. Zuccotti argues:

Pius XII and the officials of the Vatican Secretariat of State were conservative bureaucrats. Nothing could have been more alien to them than a loud radical act of direct public confrontation. As government officials, also, they defined their primary goals and responsibilities as focusing on Catholics, including converts, rather than on humanity in general. Their vision of their moral duty was as limited as their

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<sup>19</sup> Friedländer, *Pius XII and the Third Reich*, p. 237; Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust*, p. 57.

<sup>20</sup> Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows*, p. 317.

imagination of violence. They seem to have forgotten that the Pope was not only the leader of a government and an institution, but also the spokesman of a church whose moral and spiritual mission transcended practical considerations.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Zuccotti highlights the preference for diplomatic efforts over morals. However, her explanation also takes into account the ideological-Christian moment, which, in her opinion, was a significant factor in determining the position of the Holy See. Her reproach of the pope and his officials is more blatant than that of Phayer.

Guenter Lewy, who published his study *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, in 1964, has a certain degree of understanding--though not justification--of the pope's silence. Lewy feels there is no way of knowing for certain how many human lives would have been saved if Pius had protested and publicly denounced the mass murder of the Jews. He admits that such a public condemnation would have warned many Jews who had been deceived by the vain assurances of the Nazis that nothing would happen to them. However, the pope was unable to take this step, Lewy feels, without losing the loyalty of Catholic Germans. Since this group was apathetic to the fate of the Jews, any aggressive stand by the pope in favor of the Jews could have, in fact, led to a mass withdrawal from the ranks of the Church.

Lewy cites the conversation between the correspondent of *L'Osservatore Romano* in Berlin, Dr. Edoardo Senatro, and the pope. When asked if he would not protest the murder of the Jews, the pope offered the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 318-319.

following answer. “Dear Friend, do not forget that millions of Catholics serve in the German armies. Shall I bring them into conflicts of conscience?”<sup>22</sup> The soldiers had sworn their loyalty to the Reich and therefore had to obey.

In his new study, Sanchez also refers to this conversation, but, in his opinion, it is not supported by documentation. Sanchez also argues that it was not the pope’s habit to speak with reporters. In contrast to Phayer and Zuccotti, Sanchez tries to defend Pius XII’s morality, quoting from another scholar:

It seems hardly likely that Pius would value the oath the German soldiers took to obey Hitler above their consciences. W. A. Purdy says, if Pius indeed uttered [the words about obedience] it is hard to understand how he, an expert canon lawyer, could have done so if he really knew what was going on in Germany.<sup>23</sup>

It is difficult to accept this claim. Pius may not have sided with Hitler, but he was a Germanophile.<sup>24</sup> His sympathy for Germany had developed while he served as Pope Pius XI’s nuncio in Germany. As a Germanophile, it is likely that his concerns were for the soldiers, as Germans, and not necessarily as Nazis. In spite of his doubts regarding the conversation with Senatro, like Guenter Lewy, Sanchez asserts that Pius did not want to force the German soldiers into a crisis of conscience. In Sanchez’s opinion, this

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<sup>22</sup> Guenter Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 303-304.

<sup>23</sup> Sanchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>24</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust*, p. 56.



constituted a “substantial factor” in his behavior. At the same time, he argues, other, weightier factors may help to explain the policies of the Holy See.<sup>25</sup>

Between 1967 and 1982, the Vatican published eleven volumes of documents and sources. These volumes offer a more updated picture of the policies of the Holy See toward the Jews during the Third Reich. John S. Conway summarized these policies in 1982.<sup>26</sup> Relying on the new documentation, he demonstrates that the heads of the churches in Slovakia, Hungary, Vichy France, Romania, and Bulgaria did in fact raise their voices in protest and tried to prevent persecution and deportation of Jews. Still, Conway reached the conclusion that these Church representatives knew their protests would not help. Particularly important for the purposes of our discussion, however, is his assertion that in Germany, Austria, Holland, and Poland, the Gestapo and SS prevented any possible intervention by the Church. Nevertheless, Conway feels that this is not sufficient to explain the absence of more strident protest or, if such protest was in fact voiced, its ineffectiveness.

The absence of strident protest can be understood only if one takes into account the traditional anti-Jewish outlook that was the heritage of the Church hierarchy. Conway labeled this attitude “conservative elitism” and cites the witty aphorism: “To some, the Jews were considered the Christians of the future, and to others, the Christians were considered the Jews of the past.”

Conway anticipated Susan Zuccotti in his observation on the hostility of the Church hierarchy toward the Jews.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the total or partial

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<sup>25</sup> Sanchez, *Pius XII and the Holocaust*, p. 102.

<sup>26</sup> John S. Conway, “Catholicism and the Jews during the Nazi Period and After,” in Otto Dov Kulka and Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, ed., *Judaism and Christianity under the Impact of National Socialism* (Jerusalem: Historical Society for Israel, 1987), pp. 435-451.

<sup>27</sup> Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows*, p. 317.

silence of the pope and Church prelates, motivated by theological anti-Jewish considerations even as masses of Jews were being murdered, is astonishing.

## The Hidden Encyclical

In order to understand the theological anti-Jewish position of the Holy See, we must reemphasize this longstanding tradition. While Pius XII is not single-handedly responsible for it, the Pius example is unique in that he led the Church during perhaps the most inhumane period of human history. This explains the great sensitivity with which his responses to the events of that period are measured.

The story of the hidden encyclical--the never-published encyclical of Pius XI--is indicative of both phenomena: the tradition and the sensitivity. The encyclical included a condemnation of the racism that was at the center of the Nazi regime's ideology, but the draft of this encyclical disappeared. Pius XII, at the time Cardinal Pacelli, the Vatican's secretary of State, played a part in the disappearance of the document.<sup>28</sup> In an open letter to the pope, Professor Harry James Cargas wrote:

Jews and Christians alike are aware of the charge of silence which hangs over the head of Pope Pius XII whose own image hangs as an albatross above the papacy's neck when the issue of Catholic-Jewish relations is raised. Here again I feel that the acknowledgment of

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<sup>28</sup> For more on the "missing encyclical," see Michael Marrus, "The Vatican on Racism and Antisemitism, 1938 - 1939, A New Look at a Might-Have-Been," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1987), pp. 378-395; and see Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows*, pp. 32-33; Kertzer, *The Popes Against the Jews*, pp. 280-282; Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope*, pp. 189-192.

Vatican withdrawal from standing firm on the subject of persecution of Jews must be admitted and repented. The story of an encyclical leaps to mind. Some of us are aware that in 1938 Pope Pius XI commissioned an encyclical letter to be written for him by the U.S. Jesuit, John Lafarge. Father LaFarge produced that document but before it was published the Pope died... When Eugenio Pacelli assumed the chair of Peter as Pope Pius XII, he issued an encyclical letter under the same title with all of the references to antisemitism deleted.<sup>29</sup>

The draft was discovered a while later and reveals the extent to which the anti-Jewish tradition was fixed in the Church consciousness. On the one hand, it was a sharp condemnation of antisemitism, but, on the other, it perpetuated the age-old anti-Jewish position. The Jews were chosen by God to accept the Messiah, but, as a result of their stiff-necked nature, they were condemned to generations of suffering. Their redemption would come only on the day they recognized the messianic nature of Jesus. The function of the Church is to lead them toward this recognition. The Church is cognizant of the spiritual dangers posed to the Christian soul by Jewish influence so long as the Jews refuse to accept the Christian faith. Antisemitism is wrong because it constitutes an impediment to the Christian desire to ease the Jews' path to conversion.

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<sup>29</sup> "An open letter to the Pope" (no date), written by Harry James Cargas, a professor of literature at Webster University in St. Louis, in which he protests against the pope's meeting with the controversial Dr. Kurt Waldheim; part of the letter relates to the "hidden encyclical" affair.

As early as 1969, Professor Uriel Tal dwelled on the “New Version of the Discourse Between Jews and Christians.” He felt that the new nuance in this discourse was Christianity’s call on Judaism that it concede its right to exist, not from a position of degradation but from the position of human beings enjoying equal status in the modern world.<sup>30</sup> Tal’s interpretation, along with the contents of the hidden encyclical and the statement found in “*Nostra Aetate*”: “Although the Church is the new People of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed ...” reveals that the Holy See’s denunciation of antisemitism did not derive from the negative associations with antisemitism, but from inherently theological anti-Jewish interests. In other words, we are not speaking of the policies of a single Church leader but, rather, a broad-based Catholic viewpoint that influenced the actions of Pius XI and his successor Pius XII during the Third Reich.

## Under His Windows – October

### 1943

On October 16, 1943, the Nazis seized over 1,000 Jews in Rome, with the intention of deporting them to the East. That same day Ernst von Weizsäcker, the Nazi representative to the Vatican, sent a telegram to Berlin in which he used the expression subsequently borrowed by Zuccotti for the title of her

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<sup>30</sup> Uriel Tal, “Patterns in the Contemporary Jewish-Christian Dialogue” (Hebrew), Study Circle on Diaspora Jewry at the Home of the President of Israel, The Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, no. 5 (1969), p. 28.

book. “The Curia is dumbfounded, particularly as the action took place under the very windows of the Pope, as it were.”

It is instructive to dwell on this specific event, as it sheds light on the general situation. Zuccotti, who focuses her study on the Holocaust of Italian Jewry, naturally devoted more space to the affair than did the other scholars. Zuccotti asserts that the silence and the absence of protest by the pope before, during, and after the rounding up of the Jews in Rome, provides an indication of the principles that underlie his position.<sup>31</sup> She adds that if the Jews were seized in order to be sent to their deaths “under his windows,” then they clearly had no hope anywhere else.<sup>32</sup>

If the Holy See did extend aid to Jews, it was only after this mass arrest. However, even regarding this possibility the documentation is not unequivocal. Phayer feels it would be an exaggeration to speak of the rescue of thousands of Jews by the pope after they succeeded in evading the *razzia*. In his opinion, the rescuers in question were ordinary Italians, nuns and monks--particularly Father Marie-Benoit--who hid Jews at their own initiative, without instructions from the Vatican.<sup>33</sup> In other words, in the debate on the position taken by Catholics vis-à-vis the Jews at their time of distress, a distinction must be made between private initiatives stemming from humanitarian considerations and the policies of the Holy See.

### **Lobbying for the Murderers**

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<sup>31</sup> Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows*, p. 167.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>33</sup> Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust*, p. 102.

One of the allegations against the pope and the Holy See that has resurfaced in these studies is that the diplomacy shunted aside moral considerations. Phayer made this issue the focal point of his research and devoted a short chapter of his book to the lobbying by Catholic prelates on behalf of Catholic Nazi war criminals (mainly physicians) who were sentenced by the international tribunal at Nuremberg. Phayer attributes the phenomenon to the denazification process in Germany in the years following the war. The Catholic clergy sought to exploit the process in order to show that criminals who were true Catholics were not Nazis. The bishops also raised a “formal” claim before the occupation authorities in which they noted that the accused had violated *laws that were until that time unknown in Germany!* Phayer asks in astonishment: “Did the bishops actually believe that a law against murdering Jews did not exist?”<sup>34</sup> But for whatever reason, he did not delve any deeper into the answer to this weighty rhetorical question.

In my opinion, there is justification here to point out the moral failure of the Church officials. Phayer describes this in the case of Dr. Hans Eisele, a SS doctor in the Dachau, Natzweiler, and Buchenwald concentration camps who brutally killed Jewish prisoners there. Eisele was sentenced to death for these crimes by both the American occupation forces in Dachau and the Soviets in Buchenwald.

In the wake of intervention by Father Wessel and other Catholic prelates, Eisele received clemency, was sentenced to life imprisonment, and was then released ten years later. Phayer describes his cruel acts in detail and considers him a test case for other doctors for whom the clergy lobbied.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 142; see also the entire brief chapter, pp. 138-144.

This was a test case, because Eisele made a complete differentiation between Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners. He was at times willing to help non-Jews, especially if they were Catholic, and these individuals testified on his behalf at the trial. Phayer considers him a “Dr. Jekyll and Mister Hyde” character.<sup>35</sup>

However, it is not Eisele’s actions that are under discussion here, but rather the approach taken by the clergymen who were unable to act officially on behalf of the Nazi defendants without the approval of the Holy See. They demeaned the human status of the Jew and were willing to lobby on behalf of criminals who considered Jews sub-human. This moral failure finds its sources in the negative image of the Jew in Christian ideology.

## **From Traditional Antisemitism to Holocaust?**

From the studies cited above, it is clear that Pius XII played a dominant role in steering Church policy on the Jews. His great influence is explained by the fact that his opinions and decisions were not viewed as personal decisions but as deriving from the centuries-old theological anti-Jewish tradition. The debate on Pius’s policies continues between those who fervently praise his secret lobbying on behalf of the Jews during the Nazi period and those who assail him for the silence and passivity he demonstrated vis-à-vis the fate of the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

Jews then.<sup>36</sup> The researchers whose studies are discussed in this article were aware of this debate; most of them criticized the Holy See.

Among the first to expose the motives of the anti-Jewish policies of the Church leadership was Saul Friedländer, whose 1964 study was cited at the beginning of this article. He relied mainly on documents of the German Foreign Ministry from the Nazi period, especially on reports filed by Ernst von Weizsäcker, who served from 1943 onward as the ambassador of the Third Reich to the Holy See. Friedländer admits that it is not possible to reach final conclusions about the policies of the Holy See with respect to the Nazi Reich solely on the basis of German documentation, without the opportunity to study Vatican documents. Due to this limitation, the results of his research were merely hypothetical. However, given the findings of the current researchers, who availed themselves of new documentation to which Friedländer did not have access, these hypotheses have become historical facts.

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<sup>36</sup> I am grateful to Professor Dan Michman for showing me a recent article in *The Spectator* about the historian Peter Gumpel, who has the task of investigating candidates for sainthood by the Church. Gumpel defends the policies of Pius and cites a series of public figures and institutions-- from Albert Einstein to Chaim Weizmann, Moshe Sharett and others--that showered praise on the pope. Gumpel also attacks the Jewish members of the Catholic-Jewish historical commission that was supposed to examine documentation about the policies of the Holy See. As everyone knows, the commission has been dissolved, and Gumpel accuses its Jewish members of not having taken the trouble of reading the 8,000 pages of documentation!



# The Connection Between Christian Antisemitism and Nazi Antisemitism

Many of the scholars grappled with the difficult question of whether there is a connection between Christian antisemitism or pre-Nazi antisemitism and modern Nazi antisemitism. This is not the place for a full discussion of the issue, but recent research on Vatican policies bolsters the argument that there is, in fact, such a connection--historical and not necessarily causal—which should not be minimized. Following are two distinctly opposing interpretations to elucidate my position.

Shulamit Volkov considers the connection between Nazism and pre-Nazi Wilhelmine antisemitism of the nineteenth century but barely addresses the even older Christian antisemitism. To summarize her thesis:

Even if it were possible to see pre-Nazi antisemitism as a “background” of sorts to what subsequently happened in Germany, this background does not offer an *explanation* of what happened there. After all, the policy of extermination came into effect after the outbreak of World War II, not beforehand or afterward. It took place within the boundaries of the Third Reich and not anywhere else. If “modern” antisemitism was in fact a source of what took place during the Nazi era, we must demonstrate that there was something different about it than what

characterized antisemitism throughout the previous generations, since it is only in this case that the affair ended so terribly; whereas, what is unique to “modern” antisemitism cannot really be transmitted--it is manifested only in the context of that period. ...

In my opinion, the explanation for the phenomenon of Nazism lies first and foremost in a careful and responsible analysis of the period in which it took place, and not in the somewhat sterile handling of its sources. ...

The prose employed by antisemites before World War I was as far removed from the marching columns of SS as the language of upset children is from the violence of adult criminals.<sup>37</sup>

A completely different interpretation may be found in the writings of the late Professor Jacob Katz:

The key to understanding what happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century in Jewish-Gentile relations, including its catastrophic climax in the Holocaust, is not to be found in the immediate past but in the course of Jewish history, at least since its entanglement with the history of Christianity. It was the tragic mistake of the 19<sup>th</sup> century enthusiasts to

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<sup>37</sup> Shulamit Volkov, “The Written Word and the Spoken Word: On Rupture and Continuity in the History of Antisemitism in Germany,” in Yaakov Borut, Oded Heilbronner, eds., *German Antisemitism: A Reassessment* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2000), p. 32; see also, *ibid.*, p. 47; as well as her most recent book, *In the Enchanted Circle: Jews, Antisemites and Other Germans* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2002) p. 149.

believe that the traces of such deep-seated antagonism could be eliminated simply by declaring it unreasonable or unfounded.<sup>38</sup>

Although Shulamit Volkov focuses attention on the nineteenth century as the background for Nazi antisemitism, she asserts that Nazi antisemitism was “something diverse and different from what characterized the antisemitism of all previous generations.” She uses a parable: “the language of upset children is far removed from the violence of adult criminals.” It seems to me that no one contests the uniqueness of the murderous Nazi antisemitism, but the parable to the “upset” children provokes the trenchant question: *How* did the upset child become the adult criminal? The comparison of the antisemitism “of all previous generations” to the anger of a child contains an element of devaluation of the phenomenon. Childish anger can most certainly not provide an explanation or reason for adult criminality, just as Christian antisemitism is not a reason for the murder of the Jews. This hatred of Jews did not spawn the Holocaust, but those who harbor it do bear a heavy historic *responsibility*. Therefore, the handling of it is not “somewhat sterile,” as Professor Volkov put it.

It was Professor Jacob Katz who used the term “responsible” with a “moralistic ring: “applied deliberately, it transfers the subject of anti-Semitism from the domain of history to ethical accountability. It implies that Christianity is accountable for all enormities of modern anti-Semitism, including its

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<sup>38</sup> Jacob Katz, “Christian Jewish Antagonism on the Eve of the Modern Era,” in Kulka and Mendes-Flohr, eds., *Judaism and Christianity under the Impact of National Socialism*, p. 34; Professor Robert Wistrich devotes Chapter 5 of his book *Hitler and the Holocaust* to an issue that he called “Between the Cross and the Swastika.” In brief, he surveys the policies of Pius XII toward the Jews. Wistrich’s explanation of the hesitation and ambivalence of the Holy See is similar to that of Jacob Katz; see Robert Wistrich, *Hitler and the Holocaust* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001), p. 147. Once again, my thanks to Professor Michman, who drew my attention to this book.

culmination in the Holocaust.”<sup>39</sup> The historian who assesses the question of responsibility is not extending beyond his professional jurisdiction, asserts Katz. In his opinion, he must not shrink from a moral judgment, but this must be done with discretion and balance.

Under the watchword of discretion and balance, we may conclude from the research discussed in this article that the anti-Jewish theology that was nurtured over the generations also left its mark on the policies of the Holy See while Nazi atrocities were taking place. Although the Christian leadership now rejects antisemitism for its own reasons, it is not free of the historic responsibility for the Holocaust atrocity that weighs on it. As Father Marcel Dubois put it:

Although I consider it a distortion of the facts to say that the Holocaust was an act of the Christians – even though many of its perpetrators were in fact Christians – I admit that there exists sufficient testimony that the centuries-old anti-Judaism prepared the groundwork for modern anti-Semitism and for Holocaust.<sup>40</sup>

Alternatively, we can cite the droll aphorism of Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz, albeit with some reservations about his overly decisive language:

This attitude of the world with regard to the Jewish people derives from Christianity, and it makes no difference that that (Christian) world was

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<sup>39</sup> Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700-1933* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 321.

<sup>40</sup> Marcel J. Dubois, “The Challenge of the Holocaust and the History of Salvation,” in Kulka and Mendes-Flohr, ed., *Judaism and Christianity under the Impact of National Socialism*, p. 502.

no longer Christian. It stays. In the form of a jest, you could put it this way: the educated non-Jew would say to you--Jesus is just a tall tale, he never even existed, but there is one thing I can say for certain--it was the Jews that crucified him.<sup>41</sup>

The vitality of the idea of Christianity's opposition to Judaism, as embodied in Leibowitz's words, did not weaken--not even when six million Jews were being led to slaughter.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Martin Friedlander*

**Source: *Yad Vashem Studies XXXI*, Jerusalem 2003, pp. 365-388.**

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<sup>41</sup> Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *About God and the World: Conversations With Michael Shashar* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1987) p. 80.