

Anti-Judaism v. Anti-Semitism: Was Christianity Itself Responsible for the Nazi Holocaust?

By Helen M. Valois

ISSUE: Should the Pope apologize for the Nazi Holocaust? Did Christian teaching, as is increasingly being alleged, create cultural conditions which ultimately drove the Jews to their mass graves during the mid-twentieth century?

RESPONSE: In understanding the “Holocaust apology” scenario, we must distinguish between anti-Judaism among Christians, and anti-Semitism in Church teaching. The term *anti-Judaism* refers to subjective feelings of distaste towards the Jewish people. While it is sinful for Christians to be prejudiced in this way, the sorry truth is that such antagonism exists as an historical fact. Quite different is the question of *anti-Semitism*, or a philosophical belief in the inferiority of the Jewish race. Such a tenet does not exist and has never existed in Catholic doctrine or social teaching. To answer the questions noted, we must maintain this distinction between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

DISCUSSION: Assessing culpability for the Nazi Holocaust is a complex issue, because varying types and degrees of cooperation were involved. Individuals, groups, nations, and churches all reacted, or failed to react, in a myriad of ways. Three things, however, can be stated without hesitation. First of all, Catholic complicity—to the extent that it existed—involved *attitudinal anti-Judaism rather than doctrinal anti-Semitism* as is often alleged. Secondly, the anti-Semitism which ideologically fueled the gas ovens of Auschwitz was of *pagan rather than Christian roots*. The Nazis themselves made this point as strongly as has any Pope, past or present. Finally, the charge of “anti-Semitism” against the Catholic Church is *contemporary, not historical*. It must therefore be understood and addressed in its contemporary sense. An examination of that sense will show that the entire “apology demand” scenario, in short, makes no sense at all.

Anti-Judaism v. Anti-Semitism

Think, for a moment, about the difference between *prejudice* and *racism*. This analogy with the situation regarding a marginalized group in America will help us to understand the European situation concerning Jews at the time of the second World War. In our history, prejudiced Caucasians have harboured subjective feelings of distaste for black persons solely on the basis of color. It is, of course, wrong to judge by category rather than character, and this is what gives prejudice a bad name. Prejudice by itself is not racism. A prejudiced person does not necessarily act on his feelings; he might act against them. Recognizing the feelings to be wrong, he may treat people of group identities other than his own quite soundly. He may also believe his feelings are right, but treat peoples of other identities well out of respect for the law

Racism is something very different. Racists believe that certain groups are inherently inferior to other groups. Usually, they believe the group to which they belong is superior. White supremacists are not only prejudiced against blacks; they hold and teach that blacks *per se* are not as good. Racism is a serious evil of the intellectual rather than emotional realm, and is distinguishable from prejudice entirely. Just as a prejudiced person might not be racist, a racist person might not be prejudiced. For example, many of the slave holders of the American South, though racists, were “good slave holders” who treated their negroes well. Unfortunately, in most cases prejudice and racism go hand in hand, and this is what makes them so hard to tell from one another.

The same kind of situation existed regarding anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism at the time of the Nazi Holocaust. While Catholics and other Christians may have felt regrettable emotions of prejudice against the Jewish people, Christianity as such did not participate in the anti-Jewish racism of the National Socialist movement. The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews made this point emphatically clear in its recent document, “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah.” In it, they remark:

We cannot ignore the difference which exists between **anti-Semitism**, based on theories contrary to the constant teaching of the Church on the unity of the human race and on the equal dignity of all races and peoples, and the

long-standing sentiments of mistrust and hostility that we call **anti-Judaism**, of which, unfortunately, Christians also have been guilty.¹

Where does anti-Judaism historically come from? Early Christians, not yet fully grasping the meaning of Christ's death for all mankind on the Cross, tended sometimes to blame the Jews as a people for the Crucifixion. This caused societal misunderstanding and distrust. However, it was never a Scriptural or Magisterial teaching. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes clear, quite the contrary was true:

Jesus Himself . . . and Peter following suit, both accept 'the ignorance' of the Jews of Jerusalem and even of their leaders. Still less can we extend responsibility to other Jews of different times and places . . . The Church does not hesitate to impute to Christians the gravest responsibility for the torments inflicted upon Jesus, a responsibility with which they have all too often burdened the Jews alone (*CCC*, nos. 597-598).

Given this regrettable historical background, what roles did anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism play respectively in the cataclysmic persecution collectively called the Holocaust? While anti-Judaism may have fostered the persecution of the Jews, anti-Semitism caused it. While sinful members of the Church may have been prejudiced against the Jews, the one holy Catholic Church has never held racist theories against them (c.f. *CCC*, 823 ff.). Commenting on the demand for a "Holocaust apology" from the Catholic Church, our Holy Father explained,

Indeed, in the Christian world—I'm not saying on the part of the Church as such—erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament relative to the Jewish people and their presumed guilt (for the Crucifixion) circulated for too long, engendering sentiments of hostility toward this people. That contributed to a lulling of many consciences, so that—when Europe was swept by the wave of persecutions inspired by a pagan anti-Semitism that in its essence was equally anti-Christian—alongside those Christians who did everything to save those who were persecuted, even to the point of risking their own lives, the spiritual resistance of many was not what humanity expected of Christ's disciples.²

For the prejudice against the Jews which caused some people not to live up to their professed Christianity during the Holocaust, the Pope expresses sorrow. For anti-Semitism on the part of the Church neither he nor anyone else can apologize, because it does not and never did exist in the Church. When we hear, therefore, that the Holocaust happened because the Europeans were Christians, we can only reply that the Holocaust happened because they were not as Christian as they should have been.

A Pagan Anti-Semitism that was Equally Anti-Christian

The term "Aryan" originated with the occult visions of a woman named Helena Blavatsky, who envisioned human history in terms of the ascendancy of one occult group after another. During our times, the Aryan race was supposed to be on top. Hitler, in his youth, abandoned the Catholic teachings of his upbringing in order to embrace this alternate world view. He then politicized it, identifying "Aryan" traits with German ones, and the rest, unfortunately, is history.

There was no confusion on his part or his followers that their Nazi outlook was at utter variance with the traditional Judeo-Christian one. "Two fronts are clear. One is called Christianity, the other Germany. There is no third," declared the Nazi handbook *Gott und Volk* in 1942.

There is also no compromise. We Germans have been called upon by Fate to be the first to break with Christianity. It is an honor. A thousand blows tie us to the Christian belief, but one blow will make us free. To make ourselves strong and ripe for this step, is our task of holiest obligation. . . . The age of Christian civilization is past. Only German civilization has anything to say. We are Germans. Therefore we cannot be Christians.³

On this point, their testimony concurs with that of the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church. *Mit brennender sorge*, an encyclical of Pope Pius XI, made it clear in no uncertain terms that the religion of blood and race being spread by the National Socialists was in utter conflict with Christianity, and condemned by the Church. Pius XII unsparingly called Nazism a "satanic spectre."

The anti-Semitism that led to the Holocaust did not spring from Christian sources, but from apostasy. It wasn't that the Church and Nazism were aligned against the Jews, but that Nazism was aligned against both Judaism and Christianity. The presently ignored Christian victims of the gas ovens attest to this fact. As "We Remember" puts it, "The Shoah was the work of a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime. Its anti-Semitism had its roots outside of Christianity and, in pursuing its aims, it did not hesitate to oppose the Church and persecute her members also."

A Thoroughly Modern Allegation

The charges of Holocaust-inducing anti-Semitism on the part of the Roman Catholic Church have dubious historical origins. They did not come about at all until the notorious 1967 play "The Deputy" by Rudolph Hochhuth, over 20 years after the war ended. At the time of the second World War, the Church and especially her spiritual head Pope Pius XII were widely acclaimed as having opposed Nazism heroically. So if those who lived through the time of the Holocaust didn't blame the Church for it, and if our Holy Father Pope John Paul II has now apologized for any residual anti-Judaism which may inadvertently have fostered it, what more do contemporary Church critics want?

Today's charge of anti-Semitism on the part of Roman Catholicism must be understood, and responded to, in its contemporary context. What its proponents want is an admission on the part of the Church that cannot be made. They want an admission that the Church is intrinsically decrepit and fallible. For this reason, their charge of anti-Semitism cannot really be answered at all.

Take the neologism "homophobic" as an analogy here. One would think the term referred to someone who dislikes and discriminates against homosexual persons. Does it actually mean this? No. It means someone who holds as a religious principle that homosexual activity is morally wrong. Someone believing this could work in AIDS hospices, take sufferers into his own home, and approach the self-sacrifice of Mother Teresa in assisting homosexuals in every sort of trouble. If he persisted in these acts of mercy, all the while holding homosexual activity to be wrong, he would be labelled "homophobic." To change his label, he would have to change his religious beliefs. Despite the intimidation that accompanies the label, it is ludicrous to change a religious conviction just because others call him nasty names.

Something similar is going on with the term "anti-Semitic." It seems to mean a person who dislikes and discriminates against the Jews, but this is not the case at all. Now, like homophobic, it means a person who holds to orthodox Christian tenets. Take the case of St. Maximilian Kolbe as an example. There is abundant and uncontested evidence that he and his friars reached out to Jews and other refugees in pre-war Poland, and that Kolbe in the camps ministered to all alike. One young Jewish boy remembers Kolbe treating him as if he were his own son. Yet we still hear St. Maximilian accused of "anti-Semitism" in the popular press.

In other words, Catholic "anti-Semitism," like Catholic "homophobia," is becoming an unanswerable charge. As the surrounding culture of death increasingly defines *Catholic belief itself* in these untrue and unbecoming terms, it is impossible to avoid the labels without apostasizing. This, of course, we cannot do. We must adhere to the full truth taught by Jesus Christ and inculcate that truth into the culture around us. This truth witnesses to the Gospel of Life and opposes the culture of death. In this way we will not only set the record straight about the Holocaust of the Nazi era, but we also will oppose the holocaust of abortion in the strongest and only possible terms.

¹ "We Remember: A Reflection on the 'Shoah'," Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Origins*, March 26, 1998, no. 4.

² "Speech to Symposium on the Roots of Anti-Judaism," *Origins*, Nov. 13, 1997, vol. 27, no. 22, pp. 365-367.

³ Fritz Verlag, *Gott und Volk* (Berlin, 1942). Quoted in *The Bishop of Munster and the Nazis: The Documents in the Case*, translated and edited by Patrick Smith (London: Burns Oates, 1943), pp. 2-3.

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OTHER RECOMMENDED READING:

Pius XII and the Holocaust: A Reader; Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights; call (212) 371-3191.

“*Speech to Symposium on the Roots of Anti-Judaism*,” *Origins*, Nov. 13, 1997, vol. 27.

“Reflections: The Vatican Statement on the ‘*Shoah*’”; Cardinal Edward Cassidy, President of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews; *Origins*, May 28, 1998 (Vol. 28, no. 2), pp. 28-32.

“We Remember: A Reflection on the ‘*Shoah*’”; Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews; *Origins*, March 26, 1998 (Vol. 27, no. 40), pp. 669ff. **For *Origins* articles call (202) 541-3290.**

“In Defense of Pius XII”; Kenneth L. Woodward; *Newsweek*; March 30, 1998; p. 35.

“The Silence of Pius XII: A Re-Examination”; *Inside the Vatican*; June 1997; call (800) 651-1531.

FAITH FACTS:

A Friend in Word and Deed: Pope Pius XII and the Jews • No Bull: Papal Authority and Our Response • Rock Solid: The Salvation History of the Church • The Necessity of Law and Right Order

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