

Guilt and complexity: The Holocaust's lessons for the church

by [Victoria Barnett](#) in the [October 10, 2001](#) issue

Controversy about the role of the Vatican and Pope Pius XII during the Holocaust has raged ever since Rolf Hochhuth's play *The Deputy* was first performed in 1965, but the debate has intensified in recent years. Since 1965 the Vatican has published 11 volumes of selected archival material from the Nazi era—but these volumes omitted some relevant documents. Last fall, a commission of six historians (three Catholics and three Jews) concluded their examination of these books with a detailed and well-grounded plea for scholarly access to the rest of the Vatican archives. That access has not been granted and, in July, the commission announced that it could not continue its research until the archives were opened. In August, Peter Gumpel, a prominent German Jesuit at the forefront of the efforts to beatify Pius XII, accused some of the Jewish historians on the panel of “a clear propagandistic goal to damage the Holy See.”

Made with the Vatican's approval, Gumpel's remark illustrates the depth of the defensiveness among some Catholics about the ongoing discussion of Pius XII's actions during the Holocaust. To some extent, this defensiveness is understandable. The critical books on his role during the Nazi era (including the three reviewed here) have found a large audience. Some Catholic commentators charge that much of this scholarship reflects a deeper bias against the church itself.

Ironically, in recent years discussions between Catholics and Jews have led to some significant breakthroughs and more cordial relations in general. John Paul II's visit to Israel and his statements about the Holocaust were milestones in Catholic-Jewish relations. It would be unfortunate, then, if this progress were to be derailed by the ill will currently being generated.

One thing that may be lacking from the debate is a greater sense of perspective. The recent interest in Pius XII reflects a growing public interest in the Holocaust and, among scholars, a closer examination of the dynamics of institutional complicity.

The Vatican is not the only institution to come under scrutiny; Protestant churches, international NGOs such as the Red Cross, banks, art museums and international corporations such as Ford and IBM have been called to account for their behavior. A closer examination of the role of anti-Semitism inevitably raises questions about traditional Christian teachings about Judaism and the churches' role through the centuries in sanctioning and, all too often, instigating measures against the Jews.

Yet much that has been written about the Vatican and Pius XII, who served as pope during the crucial years from 1938 to 1945, is based on certain assumptions. Many assume that the Vatican's unique and powerful role in Europe gave it special options and responsibilities, and that a more decisive and outspoken pope could have changed the course of history, perhaps even preventing the genocide. Would the excommunication of leading Nazis or threats to excommunicate participants in the genocide have altered the actions of ordinary Catholics?

In their attempt to reach a definitive moral verdict, those who raise or respond to such questions often blur the line between historical reality and speculation. Some would declare Pius XII a saint, others view him (and his church) as the theological ally of Nazism. The truth lies somewhere in between. When the available evidence is examined in its entirety, Pius XII emerges as neither a saint nor a Nazi, but as a complex, enigmatic figure who reveals a great deal about the troubling ambiguity that characterized the Christian world's response to the Holocaust.

In general this response, like that of other sectors, forms a devastating pattern of compromise, prejudice, self-interest, silence, passivity and even criminal behavior. Most Catholic and Protestant leaders failed to protest against either the initial persecution of Jews or, finally, the mass murders and the death camps; their priority was to preserve their institutions and to avoid confrontations with the Nazis. It is particularly terrible to read some of the theological statements of the era: the apologies for Nazism, the carefully crafted protests that avoided any explicit mention of the victims, and the sermons that interpreted Nazi policies as instruments of God's historical will.

Yet there is another side to this story: the Christians, including members of religious orders, who hid Jews; the public protests by church leaders in this country and in Europe; the clergy outside Nazi Germany who worked with Jewish organizations to help refugees; the churches' role throughout Europe in helping resistance groups.

These people and communities were clearly in the minority, and historical debate tends to focus on the bottom line. But what is the real bottom line here? I have just offered a brief description of the two extremes, but most of the history of that era leaves us with as many questions as answers. When it comes to the underlying motives for church behavior (fear? anti-Semitism? institutional self-interest?), our conclusions ultimately rest upon our interpretation of the available data, which we know is incomplete. The pope's opaque and guarded pronouncements during the Holocaust are interpreted by his critics as indifference, by his defenders as necessary caution.

We do know that the situation facing the Catholic Church throughout Nazi-occupied Europe was complex. Catholics were involved in acts both of rescue and of murder. In Poland, they were persecuted brutally—almost 20 percent of Polish priests died at the hands of the Nazis. In other places, church leaders made an uneasy peace with Nazi authorities. In Croatia, Catholics, including priests, joined the perpetrators in the massacres of Orthodox Serbs. Depending on their own circumstances, Catholic leaders throughout Europe urged the Vatican to speak out, to remain silent or to negotiate. Our main problem is how to interpret the pope's public silence and restraint and how to balance historical research with responsible analysis. The three books reviewed here offer different insights into these questions.

Susan Zuccotti, known for her work on Italy and the Holocaust, has written a detailed description of the pope's response to Nazism and the Vatican's reaction to the events unfolding in Italy. It's a solid, often damning work of historical research that gives much new detail about the persecution and rescue of Jews in that country.

The dramatic heart of Zuccotti's book—the deportations of over 1,000 Jews from Rome in October 1943—exemplifies the historian's dilemma I described above. It is clear that the Vatican knew of the deportation plan and that it could have warned Roman Jewish leaders but did not do so (they were warned by Albrecht von Kessel, a diplomat and member of the German resistance, but did not believe him). The day after the deportations, the Vatican issued a public statement expressing gratitude for the German military's respectful and civil treatment of the Holy See, with no mention of the horrors that had just occurred.

On the other hand, most of the 4,000-5,000 Jews who escaped this roundup did so by hiding in convents and monasteries. Many of the rescuers were priests and members of religious orders. The degree to which such rescue was supported,

sanctioned and even ordered by Vatican officials is unclear, but Zuccotti concludes that Catholic rescue of Jews in Italy took place despite the pope, not because of him. She bases this conclusion largely upon his silence at other key times. Vatican statements criticizing Nazi policies were so painstakingly and cautiously worded that they can be interpreted in all kinds of ways (although many observers at the time, including the Nazis, viewed them as direct attacks). Once genocide had begun, the pope made only two very general statements on behalf of those suffering, despite pleas from some Catholic leaders and Western diplomats such as Myron Taylor, Roosevelt's emissary to the Vatican, for a more explicit protest.

Yet it is speculation to conclude that the Vatican had nothing to do with the rescue of Jews in Italy. Zuccotti correctly observes that the Vatican had extensive knowledge of the persecution of the Jews and the genocide, once it began. But if Pius XII had such detailed knowledge of these atrocities, it's difficult to believe he didn't know that Jews were being hidden in convents and monasteries. Knowledge that this was happening would, I think, have meant sanctioning it. In fact, the pattern of rescue in Italy reflects a general pattern among Catholics and Protestants throughout Europe. Rescuers were predominately individuals; church leaders consistently exercised what they saw as pragmatic caution and refrained from public protest.

Michael Phayer's book helps clarify the context of this caution. Of recent historians, Phayer does the best job of portraying Pius XII's understanding of his role as an institutional leader and, during the war, as a diplomat who sought to promote peace, preserve what he viewed as Christian civilization and maintain the church's neutrality. Phayer's book is especially helpful because he looks at Catholic behavior across Europe, portraying the complex challenges that confronted the church in Poland, Croatia and elsewhere.

As this comparative approach reminds us, Pius XII's reaction to the unfolding genocide was consistent with his guarded response at other crucial points. Despite the pleas of Catholic bishops, priests and Cardinal August Hlond, he refused to protest the Nazi atrocities against Catholic Poles in 1939. Phayer observes that Poles were so angered by the pope's silence that they even spoke about breaking with the Vatican. In Croatia, which presented a different set of problems, the pope again opted for a cautious diplomacy over confrontation and outraged many by granting an audience to the dictator Ante Pavelic, who had led the slaughter of Orthodox Serbs. And, although some Catholic leaders (notably Bishop Clemens Graf von Galen

of Münster) decried the Nazi euthanasia measures, no explicit condemnation of these murders emerged from the Vatican.

Phayer believes that Pius XII consistently chose private diplomacy over public protest because of his fixation on diplomacy at the expense of moral advocacy, his obsession with communism and his inflexible personality. Like most European church leaders at the time, Pius XII worried about the threat of communism and viewed himself as a mediator for peace. Especially during the early period of the war, these two central priorities led Catholic and Protestant leaders alike to focus on peace options, placing their hopes in the success of the resistance groups within the German military and diplomatic corps. Here the Vatican's role was hardly passive. The risks it took in 1939-40 by its involvement in secret peace negotiations between British representatives and several German resistance groups were substantial and, in the eyes of some, foolhardy.

Phayer's portrayal of the historical context of these priorities is fair and objective, even as he judges their consequences. Protesting the Nazi treatment of the Jews simply was not a top priority for most church leaders, Catholic or Protestant. Phayer charges that the Vatican's emphasis on diplomacy placed the European Jews "at mortal risk." He is especially critical of the Catholic hierarchy's failure to give more support to Catholic resistance groups and rescuers such as Gertrud Luckner and Margarete Sommer. A very important additional contribution of this book is its examination of the postwar era and how the church dealt with its history after the Holocaust, in Germany and elsewhere.

Both books raise the issue of the role of Christian attitudes toward Judaism, the primary subject of James Carroll's *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History*. Carroll traces the development of theological anti-Judaism within the Christian tradition, reflecting on its broader cultural and political consequences for the history of Western Europe. He wrestles with the original scriptures, the emerging church and the role of the early church fathers, the churches' alliances at crucial turning points in European history, and the effect this history has had on the church's understanding of its role today. Carroll's conclusions lead him to question the moral viability of the institutional church itself and the papacy's role in promoting or obstructing change.

Carroll is an excellent writer and a creative and profound thinker. Despite the book's subtitle, however, this is not so much a history as a combination of memoir and

spiritual autobiography, the work of a writer who is wrestling honestly with his faith and the legacy of his church. Carroll takes his faith, and the challenges to that faith, seriously.

Any attempt to paint on such a broad canvas inevitably raises questions of interpretation and emphasis. In particular, Carroll's focus on anti-Judaism minimizes the other factors that shaped the church's behavior throughout the centuries, including the period between 1933 and 1945. Anti-Judaism certainly played a crucial role, but the best explanation for the failure of both Catholic and Protestant churches under Nazism is multifaceted. As the moral center of culture and civilization, the Christian churches had become a powerful political and cultural force, one of the pillars of what German Lutherans called "throne and altar." This shaped how church leaders viewed their options and responsibilities between 1933 and 1945.

Carroll does address this, and one strong point of the book is his exploration of the church-state-culture relationship since Constantine's time. The emergence of an explicitly "Christian culture" had devastating consequences for non-Christians. The spread of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism and the corresponding outbreaks of violence against Jews were linked to this understanding of culture. Nonetheless, there is no straight line from prejudice to behavior, or from Christian teachings to Nazism. And, there has been significant theological work in recent decades in response to the Shoah; a more detailed discussion of that would have been welcome.

Carroll concludes by listing a number of issues—the Catholic Church's attitude toward democracy, liberation theology, pluralism, etc.—that he would like to see on the agenda of a Vatican III. Though I agree with many of his opinions, I wonder whether making progress in these areas would create the kind of institution that would have responded differently to the Holocaust. This is the deeper assumption here. The task of rethinking Christian theological attitudes toward Judaism is important, as is an ongoing and open dialogue in which Christians really listen to Jews. But we will never know whether a theology more open to pluralism would have led to a different Vatican policy during the Holocaust. Altering patterns of institutional hierarchy and responding to genocide are two different things.

At one point Michael Phayer writes that the Vatican failed to offer leadership because "by temperament Pius did not know how to react to genocide." Who does?

If nothing else, the history of the post-Holocaust era testifies eloquently to our helplessness in this regard. We may all wish that Pius XII had spoken out forcefully against the genocide and rallied Europe's Catholics behind him; but we simply don't know whether that would have stopped the Nazis. Several U.S. and European Protestant leaders, including the archbishop of Canterbury, did issue impassioned condemnations of the genocide and called for lifting the immigration restrictions against Jewish refugees. Yet they were unable to rally much support, either from members of their churches or from their governments.

Ultimately, we don't know whether Pius XII believed that he was actually doing the best he could to help the victims of Nazism. The pope's defenders often bypass the central moral reality of this history, which is that millions of innocent people were left to the mercy of their persecutors, and that all too often the churches were silent. His critics tend to ignore the historical options and realities that he faced, and the perceptions of many at the time. All would be better served if scholars could have access to the Vatican archives.

I suspect that what we would find there would be similar to what has emerged from Protestant archives here and in Europe: a complex and incomplete picture of courage and cowardice, of good intentions and indifference, of failure and of small, poignant successes. Archival material is important especially because it gives us insight into how people actually thought. It makes historical figures come to life. By giving us people's actual words, unfiltered by hindsight, archival material reveals how the world looked to them. Among other things, it gives researchers a strong sense of humility.

But though the Vatican's closed records would be invaluable for helping us to understand what happened under Nazism, they would not resolve the daunting question that remains: How can an institution like the church respond effectively to something like the Holocaust? Rethinking theology and eradicating prejudice are part, but not all, of the answer. As all three of these books remind us, the relationship between faith and political power shapes the church's witness in the world, its alliances and its legacy for Christians and non-Christians alike.