

H.W. Crocker: Triumph

by Russell Shaw

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In the last several years the culture war against the Catholic Church has been extended to a new battleground—the writing of history. It is not the first time this has happened, since it has long been known that he who gets to tell the story of the past his way can reasonably hope to shape the future. Think of the “Black Legend” concocted against colonial Spain. Still, it would be hard to think of any previous era that witnessed a more concentrated attack on Catholicism in the pages of newly penned historical or pseudo-historical works than this one has.

It is a notable feature of this assault on the Church that some of its leading figures are themselves Catholics. Among these are John Cornwell (*Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*, Viking, 1999), Garry Wills (*Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit*, Doubleday, 2000), James Carroll (*Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews*, Houghton Mifflin, 2001), Thomas Cahill (*Pope John XXIII*, Viking, 2002), and others. Quotations suggest the flavor of their historiography. Wills, dismissing the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, says it implies that the Virgin Mary's “very flesh was...like kryptonite, unable to die.” Cahill, raging against Pope St. Pius X for his campaign against Modernism, tosses off the line, “He may have been clinically paranoid.” Say one thing for these Catholic writers, they've got class.

Why has this been happening? A simple desire to fill in unexplored gaps in the history of the Church, admit mistakes, and correct failings would be commendable. That is the intention underlying Pope John Paul II's program of “purification of memory,” which has included such welcome steps as setting the

record straight on the mishandling of the Galileo case and on the Holy Office's condemnation of a number of propositions attributed to the innovative religious founder and theologian Antonio Rosmini-Serbati (1797-1855) but now acknowledged not to be his. Honesty like this regarding embarrassments out of the past is praiseworthy and constructive.

But the new revisionists have more in view than setting the record straight. In fact, they have an agenda. It is to reinterpret the record in line with their own progressive ideology, defame historical figures whom they dislike, and use the resulting caricature of the Church of the past as a club against the Church of the present in order to pave the way for the Church of the future. Cornwell candidly predicts a "cataclysmic schism" in the near future between Catholic traditionalists seeking to uphold a Church modeled on the "pyramidal" model associated with Pius XII and progressives like himself who seek to promote the ascendancy of a decentralized, pluralistic, democratized model of the Church. In this struggle books like his—and Wills's and Carroll's and Cahill's—are meant to play an important part. To take just one example: When a writer like Cahill assails Pius X on the subject of Modernism, it is because he thinks Modernism's relativizing, psychologizing religious vision is correct and hopes it will prevail.

Against this background it is a distinct relief to turn to H.W. Crocker's new one-volume popular history of Catholicism *Triumph* (Prima Publishing, 2001). The book's subtitle says it all: "The Power and the Glory of the Catholic Church." Along with being history, this is an unabashed love song to Catholicism, written by a Catholic convert author who has worked as a journalist, speechwriter, and book editor.

To get the feel of it, compare Crocker's version of certain historical events with their treatment by the Catholic revisionists.

Here is Cahill on the Cathars (Albigensians), the bizarre, body-hating sect of Manichean origin which provoked a bloody military struggle in southern France in the thirteenth century: "The Albigensians held austere beliefs not unlike those of the Franciscans." And here is Crocker: "The Albigensians were a sort of Pro-Death League, opposed to marriage, children, and pregnancy (a calamity for which abortion was recommended); and if one could not follow a Pauline path of celibacy, the next best thing was fornication that did not perpetuate the species." Cahill is talking nonsense, while Crocker, despite the somewhat breezy style, has got it right.

Here is Wills on Blessed Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors*: "Though the Pope thought of each stage of this campaign [the definition of the Immaculate Conception, the *Syllabus*, Vatican Council I] as dealing out punishment to the diabolical schemes of modernity, the *Syllabus* was nearly a knockout blow delivered to himself. He was lucky that some took it as a joke..." Here is Crocker: "[Pius IX's] most memorable contribution was *The Syllabus of Errors* (1864), which targeted liberalism—and its spin-offs communism and socialism—in a list of eighty mistaken ideas....*The Syllabus of Errors* is a consistent attack on the power of the state and on the idea, which is explicitly condemned, that might makes right. In the context of twentieth-century politics, these are the striking passages." Wills is mouthing the politically correct progressive line, a tired cliché by now; Crocker has something new and interesting to say.

Note that Blessed Pius IX is a favorite whipping-boy for the revisionists. His unpardonable sin from their point of view was his outstanding success in the religious sphere (though certainly not the political). "His religious achievements were enormous," Crocker writes; he did more than anyone else to create the doctrinally, devotionally, and structurally strong Catholic system of modern times that flourished up to the

1960s and that the progressives now seek to destroy.

Triumph is not a perfect book. The style, though certainly readable, now and then is a mite too breezy. In its eagerness to present the Church in a good light, moreover, the book leaves out some important elements of the story: e.g., the "Donation of Constantine," a forged document, probably of the fifth century, which supposedly showed Constantine bestowing entitlements on Pope Sylvester and which played an important part in the endless pope-emperor, church-state wrangles of the Middle Ages. We still lack an entirely adequate replacement for Philip Hughes's *A Popular History of the Catholic Church* (Macmillan, 1953). In this regard, it should be noted that Crocker's aim in part is to provide an alternative to Thomas Bokenkotter's widely circulated *A Concise History of the Catholic Church* (Image Books, 1990), which Crocker describes as "focused on liberal Catholicism."

Like the well-known elephant in the living room, there is one issue—or, perhaps, cluster of issues—standing head and shoulders above the rest in the recent writing of revisionist histories of Catholicism. It is the role of Pope Pius XII and the Catholic Church in regard to the Nazi Holocaust during World War II. The Catholic revisionists invariably talk about it—Cornwell and Carroll produced entire books on the subject—and lately they have been joined by Jewish writers.

Surely the most egregious of the latter up to now is Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, who in the January 21 issue of *The New Republic* devoted a long review-article (well over half the magazine) to accusing the Pope and the Church of anti-Semitism. He is author of a book published by Knopf called *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* and of a forthcoming volume with the ominous title *A Moral Reckoning: The Catholic Church During the Holocaust and Today*. It should be a pip.

Goldhagen is not simply angry but over the edge. Anti-Semitism

among European Catholics and other Christians deserves serious study, but invective is no help. In one casual aside—a comparatively mild one at that—the author calls the Catholic Church “a self-proclaimed authoritarian institution, seeking ever more to clamp down on its members.” Elsewhere he dismisses the New Testament account of Jesus’ death as fiction. (Jews had no hand in it, you see.) If a Catholic writer attacked Judaism as Goldhagen attacks Catholicism, he would correctly be called an anti-Semite; if Goldhagen attacks the Catholic Church this way, what does that make him (and *The New Republic* too)?

To say Pius XII was anti-Semitic is a laughable charge, and the evidence offered for it is correspondingly laughable. From the end of World War II until years after his death in 1958, Jews universally praised him as a friend who worked hard to help Jews during the war. The campaign against him began in 1963 with Rolf Hochhuth’s play *The Deputy*. Its caricature of a venal pope bore no relation to fact, but the campaign has continued ever since, with Cornwell’s dishonest volume of 1999 marking a new escalation. Now the floodgates are open. The boldness of this project is astonishing. The ultimate target of these critics, it now is clear, is not what some Catholics did in the past but what Catholics believe in the present. The only way for Catholics to appease them would be to abandon the faith.

Crocker calls the attack on Pope Pius and the Church a “backhanded compliment.” No one asks why Protestants or Anglicans or the Orthodox did not do more to help Jews; rather, as he points out, echoing Arnold Toynbee, in such world crises “only one Christian voice and one Christian institution” really count—the voice of the pope, the institution called “the Church.” *Triumph* may not be a history book for the ages, but here and now it is something almost as good: a book of uncommon decency and much common sense.

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His latest book is Ministry or Apostolate: What Should the Catholic Laity Be Doing? (Our Sunday Visitor, 2002).