

# JEWISH REACTION TO THE POPE QUESTIONED

By: Rabbi Irwin Kula

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The official Jewish response to Pope Benedict XVI's recent decision to reach out to the St. Pius X Society and to revoke the excommunication (though not yet determining the status) of four bishops says a great deal about the psycho-social state of American Jewish leadership or at least the leadership that claims to speak for American Jews.

The admittedly unnerving if not hurtful Holocaust denying views of one of those bishops, British born Richard Williamson, an obscure, irrelevant, cranky old man, offered on Swedish television, evoked the wrath of many Jewish organizations. This will have "serious implications for Catholic-Jewish relations" and there will be a "political cost for the Vatican" they threatened. And from Israel, the Chief Rabbinate in Israel, one of the most corrupt religious establishments in Western democracies, entered the fray calling into doubt the pope's impending visit to Israel.

As an eighth generation rabbi and someone who lost much family in the Holocaust, it could just be me, but this official Jewish response seems outrageously over the top. Do millions of American Jews sufficiently care that the pope revoked the excommunication of this unheard of bishop such that major Jewish organizations should devote so much energy and attention to this and turn it into a cause célèbre worthy of front page attention? And is this the way we speak to each other after decades of successful interfaith work on improving

our relationship?

How is it that the view of some cranky bishop who has no power evokes calls of a crisis in Catholic – Jewish relations despite the revolutionary changes in Church teachings regarding Jews since Vatican II? Where is the “proportionality,” where is the giving the benefit of the doubt—a central religious and spiritual imperative—in response to something that is admittedly upsetting but in the scheme of things is less than trivial especially given this pope’s historic visit to Auschwitz in which he unambiguously recognized the evil perpetrated upon Jews in the Holocaust and in his way “repented” for any contribution distorted Church teachings made to create the ground for such evil to erupt.

Something is off-kilter here. Is it possible that the leadership of Jewish defense agencies, people with the best of motivation who have historically done critical work in fighting anti-Semitism, have become so possessed by their roles as monitors of anti-Semitism, so haunted by unresolved fears, guilt, and even shame regarding the Holocaust, and perhaps so unconsciously driven by how these issues literally keep their institutions afloat, that they have become incapable of distinguishing between a bishop’s ridiculous, loopy, discredited views about the Holocaust and a Church from the Pope down which has clearly and repeatedly recognized the evil done to Jews in the Holocaust and called for that evil to never be forgotten?

Perhaps, this called for a little understanding of what it must be like to actually run a 1.2 billion person spiritual community (one with which I disagree on many issues) and to be trying to create some sense of unity from right to left, from extreme liberalism to extreme traditionalism. How about cutting a pope, who we know, along with the previous pope, is probably amongst the most historically sensitive popes to the issues of anti-Semitism, Holocaust, and the relationship to Judaism and Jews, a little slack, given how he is trying to

heal his own community. And is it possible that the pope's desire/hope/need to reintegrate the Church (he has also reached out to Liberal theologian Hans Kung) may be of more importance both to the Church and actually to religion on this planet than whether we Jews are upset about the lifting of excommunication of one irrelevant bishop?

Would we Jews like to be judged by the crankiest, most outlandish, hurtful, and stupid thing any rabbi in the world said about Catholics or Christians? We Jews are no longer organized to excommunicate and a rabbi can't be defrocked the way the Church does with its clergy but surely there are individual rabbis who say things so abhorrent about the "other" that though we still call the person rabbi we would not want to be taken to task for doing so.

Finally, when the pope as well as key Vatican officials said within a day that Williamson's views are "absolutely indefensible," where was a little humility in response? Wouldn't it have been interesting, yet alone ethically compelling, for those who initially lashed out to have acknowledged that perhaps they did overreact and that they do know that the Church and specifically this pope are very sensitive to these issues? But that we ask the pope and church hierarchy to please understand that, whether fully justified or not, we are still very very raw and very vulnerable regarding the Holocaust and so we are sorry if we did overreact and we are deeply grateful for the pope's unambiguous reiteration of that which we do know is his view and is contemporary Catholic teachings.