

The Papacy Under Attack

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In recent years there have been a series of books that have dealt both directly and indirectly with the accusation that Pope Pius XII bore responsibility for the Holocaust in World War II. Beginning with John Cornwell's "Hitler's Pope,"¹ through Garry Wills' "Papal Sin"² and concluding – at least at this point in time – with James Carroll's "Constantine's Sword,"³ all three books managed a short life on the *New York Times*' bestsellers list. The books have been influential in continuing the propaganda campaign that Pope Pius XII was a silent witness to the Holocaust who did virtually nothing to help the Jews. The charge is made that Pius refused to condemn Nazi atrocities because he wanted to maintain a strong Germany to serve as a counter-balance to the Soviet Union in Europe. At heart, these critics claim, Pius was more interested in maintaining and reinforcing a developing papal absolutism than in facing the Nazis. And this campaign for "papal absolutism" is at the heart of the papacy of Pope John Paul II they charge.

Each book, of course, has its own particular emphasis in addressing the subject. Cornwell portrays Pius as a monarchial pope with an anti-Semitic background whose primary agenda was increased centralization of Church power within the papacy. As such, Cornwell maintained that Pius XII "was the ideal Pope for Hitler's unspeakable plan. He was Hitler's pawn. He was Hitler's Pope."⁴ While Wills' disavows any in depth exploration of the papal role in the Holocaust, he assumes that Pius had a basically pro-German stance out of fear of Communism, and was locked into the Vatican's "own sorry history with regard to the Jews."⁵ This analysis of Pius

and the Church during World war II serves to introduce Wills' central thesis that the Church has in place "structures of deceit" created to artificially prop-up papal power.

Carroll relies primarily on Cornwell as a source for the role of Pius in the Holocaust⁶ He echoes Cornwell's theory of Pius as solely concerned with papal power, but also sees Pius' alleged lack of action in the face of the Holocaust as historically determined by 2,000 years of Church anti-Semitism, rooted in Scripture, theology and tradition. Echoing Wills, he states that "the Vatican's preference for its own power, as it pursued its vision of an absolutist papacy, was only a version of the choice countless Europeans made to pursue their own welfare without regard for those outside the circle of their concern – the Jews."⁷ Carroll argues that anti-Semitism was so central to Catholic thought that "Hitler's anti-Jewish program, even at its extreme, was simply not that offensive to the broad population of Catholics."⁸

The critical aspect of all three books is that authors identifying themselves as Catholic wrote them, and all have a different agenda in mind than merely condemning Pope Pius XII. One can quickly determine that Pius and the Holocaust, even in Cornwell's account, are only tools for the unifying premise that underlies all three books: that the papacy itself is the primary target, both in general, and specifically the papacy of Pope John Paul II. All three books use Pius XII, and exploit the Holocaust, as a means to make points in an internal Catholic debate over papal primacy – meaning the extent of papal juridical authority within the Church – and papal infallibility. While Cornwell's focus is narrower than both Wills and Carroll, to see any of these books as a serious investigation into Catholic-Jewish relations, and how the Church under Pius responded to the Holocaust, is to misunderstand their purpose.

Virtually all secular reviews highlighted these

books because of their charges concerning the role of Pius and the Church in regard to the Jews during the World War, and as negative portrayals of the Church in history. Yet, these are derivative works in their treatment of Pius XII, with little original scholarship or research on the era, by authors who are not historians.⁹ Their primary purpose is to attack the papacy as an institution within the Catholic Church as it is led by Pope John Paul II, rather than to more clearly understand the role Pope Pius XII played during the war years. Pius XII is simply a tool for a radical internal Church agenda. As is the Holocaust.

Pius XII is a convenient tool for a number of reasons. First, of course, he was the last pre-Vatican II pope. As such, identifying Pope John Paul II with him makes it far easier to paint the present pontiff as a reactionary figure representing the past rather than the future. Identifying the two means that discrediting the image of Pius XII, discredits the image of Pope John Paul II. Second, the movement for the beatification of Pius XII, protested in certain Jewish quarters, provided a useful spark. The possible beatification of Pius XII, along with the actual beatification of Pius IX in September 2000, could be portrayed as an endorsement of an "imperial papacy" by John Paul II (forgetting the fact that Pope John XXIII was beatified at the same time). Third, there was a small corpus of historical works in the last 40 years aimed at Pius XII that could supply ready secondary resources to build a case against him. Finally, there was a growing public awareness of the anti-Pius historical view in regard to the Holocaust with few contrary portraits. Pius has had over the last 40 years a good number of detractors but a comparatively small number of defenders, until recently. There was, therefore, a casual acceptance of the possibility of a negative portrait of Pius that made it unnecessary to build a rigorous case against him. Particularly in Wills and Carroll, the anti-Pius perspective is simply assumed, rather than carefully argued.

The Pius 'animus'

For the 13 years after World War II ended until his death on October 9, 1958, Pius XII was universally acclaimed for his efforts to save Jewish lives in the face of the Holocaust. There were no accusations during this period of a “silent” pontiff with pro-Nazi leanings. At the time of his death, numerous national and international Jewish organizations praised his wartime record, reflecting a 1942 *New York Times* Christmas editorial during the war that called Pius “a lonely voice crying out of the silence of a continent.” (Such Jewish praise would be dismissed later as Israeli politicking, rather than heartfelt – which is a rather cruel accusation to make, considering that at the time many of those praising Pius had lived through the Holocaust itself.)

The myth of Pius XII began with a 1963 drama by Rolf Hochhuth, an obscure German playwright. In “Der Stellvertreter” (“The Representative” or “The Deputy”) Hochhuth charged that Pius XII maintained an icy silence during the Holocaust. “The Deputy” is readily dismissed as serious history.¹⁰ Yet, five years after his death, the reputation of Pius was beginning to face serious historical revisionism.

Why this revisionism? Pius XII was unpopular with certain circles for the anti-Stalinist, anti-Communist agenda of his post-war pontificate. The Church under Pius XII was seen as the leading conservative force in post-war Europe. This was a period where leftist sentiments in the West were still tied to a flirtation with Communism, if no longer supportive of Stalinism. In leftist academic circles, particularly in Italy in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, Pope Pius was seen as the standard-bearer for a political crusade, establishing the Church as a universal anti-Communist force. There was a concerted effort to

discredit both that crusade, and the pontificate that was perceived as generating it.

The general charges against Pius XII were that while he was not pro-Nazi during the war, he hated Bolshevism more than he hated Hitler. This lead him to ignore the fate of the Jews so Nazi Germany would not be demonized. It was claimed that the wartime pontiff's strategy was to maintain a strong Germany as a bulwark against Communism. He refused to excommunicate Hitler and his Nazi cronies with Catholic backgrounds, or to speak out boldly against Nazi atrocities, because he did not want to inflame anti-German passions as a strong Germany would be necessary to restrain the Soviet Union. Some even charged that the Vatican policy under Pope Pius XII covertly supported Nazi Germany in its attack on the Soviet Union, with papal plans to serve as the negotiator between Germany and the Western allies to follow after Communism's collapse. When that strategy failed, the pope then helped to create the anti-Soviet atmosphere that resulted in the "Cold War" in the late 1940s and 1950s. Hochhuth's charge of papal "silence" fit the theory that Pius XII refused to publicly criticize Nazi Germany's attacks on the Jews in order that the country could serve effectively as an ongoing block to Soviet expansion.

The theory, of course, has never been documented because there is no evidence that even suggests such a papal strategy. The 2000 interim report of the international Catholic-Jewish commission formed to study the Vatican role in the Holocaust, a group not in any way particularly friendly to the legacy of Pius, could find no such evidence of an anti-Soviet, pro-Nazi Vatican strategy during the war. The sources for such theories, such as they exist, were generally Nazi wishful-thinking that hoped for Vatican support in the war once the Soviet Union became the enemy. Yet, the myth persists and is cited as a major motivating factor in papal complicity with Nazism in all three books.^{[11](#)}

Pius certainly recognized Stalinism for what it was. The Church under his leadership, as well as the prior pontificate of Pius XI, had no illusions about what Communist domination would mean, both for Europe and the Church. Yet all evidence points to the fact that the Vatican under Pius XII recognized Nazi Germany as the far greater immediate threat. By August 1933, when Hitler had become German chancellor, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pius XII, expressed to the British representative to the Holy See his disgust with the Nazis and “their persecution of the Jews, their proceedings against political opponents, the reign of terror to which the whole nation was subjected.” When it was stated to him that Germany now had a strong leader to deal with the communists, Cardinal Pacelli responded that the Nazis were infinitely worse.¹² More important, his actions during the war belied any favorable strategy toward Nazi Germany at the Soviet Union’s expense. After Hitler ordered the invasion of the Soviet Union, the question quickly arose over aiding communists in the war against the Nazis. The issue became particularly important in the United States where aid was routinely supplied to the Allies and was to be extended to the Soviet Union. A number of bishops raised the issue and, very quickly, Pius XII settled the affair noting that aid to the “people” of the Soviet Union was not aid to communism. When the Soviets became part of the Allied war effort, Pius assured President Franklin Roosevelt that he would not issue any condemnations of Soviet atrocities against the Church. There is simply no evidence that Pius collaborated or compromised in any way with Nazi Germany in its war with the Soviet Union.

Of course, the whole idea of the “silence” of Pius XII – whatever the alleged strategies behind it – is a misreading of history if meant to imply a lack of papal concern or actions on behalf of the Jews. What the Church was able to accomplish in World War II under the direction of Pius XII was what no other agency, government or entity at the time was able to accomplish: saving Jewish lives. Pulitzer Prize

winning historian John Toland, no friend of Pius XII, summed it up when he wrote that the Church under the leadership of Pius “saved the lives of more Jews than all other churches, religious institutions and rescue organizations combined.”¹³ Pinchas Lapide, Israeli consul in Italy, estimated that the actions of Pius XII saved over 860,000 Jewish lives during World War II. If that were an exaggeration by half, and then half again, it would record more Jewish lives saved by the Church than by any other entity at the time. The critics of Pius have yet to suggest a strategy that he could have implemented that would have saved more lives.¹⁴

Despite the clear historical record, “The Deputy” took on far greater importance than it deserved. Carroll tells the story that as a young seminarian, “we passed contraband copies of The Deputy from hand to hand as if it were pornography.”¹⁵ Leftists used it as a means to discredit an anti-Communist papacy. Instead of Pius working with every means available to the Holy See to rescue European Jews in the face of complete Nazi entrapment, an image was created of Pius XII as a political schemer who would willingly sacrifice Jewish lives to stop the spread of Communism. “The Deputy” was merely the mouthpiece for an ideological interpretation of history that helped create the myth of a “silent” Pope Pius XII doing nothing in the face of Nazi slaughter.

This secular animus against Pius after his death had been generated throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s. The animus against Pius within certain Catholic circles was certainly influenced by this agenda, but was not overly strong during the papacies of Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI. Pope Pius XII remained a popular figure after his death among Catholics as a whole, admired for his anti-Communism, his war record, and a general perception of his personal sanctity. Questions about Pope Pius XII in certain Catholic circles, particularly in the United States, were limited to

concerns that his staunch anti-Communism had generated early support in the American hierarchy, particularly from Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York, for American involvement in Vietnam. But for the most part, Vatican II (1962-1965) and its aftermath overshadowed the papacy of Pius XII. If anything, he was viewed by progressives as a quaint remnant of a Church that was dramatically renewed after his papacy, rather than a regressive symbol or an anti-Semite with Nazi sympathies. It would not be until the papacy of Pope John Paul II that a stronger reaction began to develop against Pius within certain Catholic circles. As is clearly seen in Cornwell's book, that response against Pope Pius XII generally developed out of a reaction against the papacy of Pope John Paul II.

At the conclusion of "Hitler's Pope," Cornwell's case against Pius is revealed for what it is: an attack on the papacy as exercised by Pope John Paul II. "The progressives believed that this was a Pope (John Paul II) to implement the reforms of Vatican II. The traditionalists, however, trusted that a prelate reared in the Catholicism of Poland would restore the old disciplines and values. Few suspected the extent to which he would disappoint the progressive side of the Church divide."¹⁶ Under Pope John Paul II, Cornwell charges, "Pacelli's monolithic pyramidal model of the Church has once again reasserted itself, and the metaphors of the 'pilgrim Church on the move' and the 'People of God' are seldom employed. Pluralism and collegiality are characterized as antagonistic to central authority."¹⁷

Cornwell's essential theory is echoed in both Wills and Carroll. "So what accounts not only for the silence of Pope Pius XII, but for Eugenio Pacelli's complicity with Hitler in the early years?" Carroll asks, assuming both that alleged silence and alleged complicity. "The early years offer the clue, for it was then that Pacelli's determination to put the accumulation and defense of papal power above everything else showed itself for what it was. Above the fate of the

Jews, certainly, but also above the fate of the Catholic Church in Europe.”¹⁸ Wills portrays Pius as perhaps an unwitting victim, at best, of “structures of deceit” that force people to lie to defend papal authority. While stating that the actual role of Pope Pius XII during the war is still under debate¹⁹ Wills clearly presents his position by claiming that if Pius is canonized it will force his supporters to “make false claims in order to defend the words of a saint,” which “would make him the source of a new round of deceit structured into past dishonesties.”²⁰ Wills entire thesis is that in order to artificially prop-up papal power, the Church engages in ongoing theological, sacramental, historical and disciplinary lying. Pope Pius XII did what he had to do in the war, according to Wills, to maintain these structures of deceit that support papal power. Those who defend him today are “papalotors” caught up in these same structures.

All three books reference their views on Pope Pius XII both forward to Pope John Pail II and back to Pope Pius IX (Pio Nono) and the First Vatican Council (1869-1870). That Council’s definition of papal infallibility is seen as the foundation of Pius’ alleged obsession with a monarchical papacy, and Pope John Paul II’s exercise of papal authority. All three authors tend to mix the issue of papal infallibility – the Catholic understanding that when the pope solemnly defines doctrine he speaks infallibly – with papal juridical authority, which is the extent of the papacy’s authority within the institutional Church over matters such as the appointment of bishops. While these are two separate and distinct issues – historically and theologically – all three authors tend to lump them together.

Cornwell begins his book after Italian national troops had seized the Papal States from Pope Pius IX. He invents a picture of Pope Pius IX just prior to the First Vatican Council that dramatically fits the theme of a papally-

rigged council that would impose a new understanding of the papacy on the Church, an understanding that would determine the reaction of Pius XII to the rise of Hitlerism, World War II and the Holocaust, as well as that being resurrected presently by Pope John Paul II:

“Pio Nono had erected upon himself the protective battlements of God’s citadel; within, he raised the standard of the Catholic faith, based on the word of God as endorsed by himself, the Supreme Pontiff, Christ’s Vicar upon earth. Outside were the standards of the Antichrist, man-centered ideologies that had been sowing error ever since the French Revolution, And the poisonous fruit, he declared, had even affected the Church itself: movements to reduce the power of the popes by urging national Churches independent of Rome. Yet just as influential was a long-established tendency from the opposite extreme: ultramontaniam, a call for unchallenged papal power that would shine out across the world, transcending all national and geographic boundaries. Pio Nono now began to prepare for the dogmatic declaration of just such an awe-inspiring primacy. The world would know how supreme he was by a dogma, a fiat, to be held by all under pain of excommunication.”²¹

Wills describes the First Vatican Council’s definition of papal infallibility as a rigged event strong-armed by Pius IX on an unwilling hierarchy; where opposition was silenced and careers threatened. He quotes Lord John Acton, castigating the bishops who had “yielded to tyranny”: “They approved what they were called on to reform, and solemnly blessed with their lips what their hearts knew to be accursed. The Court of Rome became thenceforth reckless in its scorn of the opposition, and proceeded in the belief that there was no protest they would not forget, no principle they would not betray, rather than defy the Pope in his wrath.”²² Carroll states that “Vatican I hauled the Church

higher into the misanthropic wind, a course from which not even John XXIII, given his successors, was able to bring about.”²³

The essential argument of each author is that the First Vatican Council of the 19th Century fundamentally changed the Church by creating out of whole cloth a doctrine of papal infallibility. This doctrine greatly enhanced a centralization of juridical power within the Church under the papacy. It was the machinations of Pope Pius IX, resenting the end of the temporal power of the papacy, which caused this allegedly revolutionary development. Pope Pius XII was raised in the Church in an atmosphere where this new papal power was being codified and confirmed. As Secretary of State under Pope Pius XI, and as pope, this papal autocracy would be the driving force behind every decision and policy, including Church reaction to Nazism and the Holocaust. Wills, Cornwell and Carroll portray Cardinal Pacelli under Pius XI selling out the Catholic Center Party of Germany to the Nazis in order to directly control the German Church, without regard to what the Nazis ascent to power would mean, particularly to the Jews. His alleged silence in the face of the Holocaust is explained as simply another example of papal grandiosity, as speaking out might compromise his neutrality and not allow him to be the mediator of world peace. The co-joined narrative continues that after Pius is gone, the Second Vatican Council is called by Pope John XXIII to limit this papal autocracy, but is undermined by his death and his predecessor, Paul VI, who was trained under Pope Pius XII. Pope John Paul II is then portrayed as engaged in a complete dismantling of whatever reforms the Second Vatican Council managed to enunciate in the areas of collegiality.

Carroll gives his own synopsis of this mini-history: “Liberalism and modernism were seen as bearing the destruction of civilization itself...so the Catholic strategy of arming the leader of the Church with the spiritual mace of

infallibility made some sense....Vatican II would do little to alter that course...Pius IX represented to Catholic liberals of my generation the Church's great stumble. We associated him with old battles that would never need to be refought, or so we thought. We had a first hint that we were wrong when the Vatican revoked Hans Kung's *missio canonica*, his right to teach as a Catholic, in 1979. Kung was the dominant theological model of our generation, and what brought the wrath of the Vatican down on him, revealingly, was his book *Infallible? An Inquiry*. Published in 1970, the work drew the Vatican's full fire once John Paul II had come to the throne in 1978, and it soon became clear that he took Kung's challenge personally. John Paul II, holding back a second tidal wave of liberalism, had reason to identify with Pius XI's resistance to the first wave. Both men were shaped by early traumas, both saw the very existence of the Church at stake, and both, for that reason, when their authority to defend the Church was challenged, responded by claiming that authority more resolutely than ever. It was with survival in mind that Pius XI demanded the ultimate gesture of support from the bishops of his Vatican Council."²⁴

All of which is a simplistic reading of history tied to a fixation on the papacy and alleged papal power. This is why the authors feel little compunction exploiting the Holocaust for matters of internal Church debate. Their obsession is with the papacy as conducted by Pope John Paul II, whom they tie intimately with Pius IX and Pius XII. Belittling Pius IX and tying Pius XII directly to the Holocaust are means to an end: pushing a particular vision of Catholicism and the papacy to which Pope John Paul II stands in stark contradiction.

Since there is so much historical distortion here, it is briefly necessary to revisit two concepts: The First Vatican Council's definition of papal infallibility in 1870, and the juridical authority of the papacy as seen in the

appointment of bishops, which Cornwell calls “the key issue.”²⁵ The issues raised in these books concerning Pius and the Holocaust are only a front for these two issues that are critical to the agenda of all three authors.

In 1867, when Pope Pius IX called for a general council of the Church., it was originally thought that the Council would be pastoral in tone, dealing with the need to update Church canonical law and the status of the growing foreign missions. However, it soon became obvious that there was a need to discuss the authority of the papal office itself. Many of the events of the previous 40 years had centered on the office of the papacy and the nature of papal authority and there were various movements at play within the Church. On the one hand, a strong movement – referred to as “ultramontanism” – believed that papal authority must be understood in virtually limitless terms. Supporters of this view of the papacy believed that a strong papacy provided protection to the local Catholic communities overwhelmed by aggressively anti-Catholic states and stood as a voice for the universality of the Church. This was particularly evident in states where the Church was under attack or subject to government control. On the other hand, there were historic movements such as Gallicanism which saw the pope as simply a “senior bishop among bishops,” which would dramatically limit papal authority in the face of national Churches. Similarly, there were strains of Conciliarism that sought to center the authority of the Church in general councils. There was even “Josephenism” which would subject the local Church to the control of the State.

But at this point in the 19th Century, many of those movements to limit the historic nature of the papacy had lost serious momentum within the Church. The emergence of the modern liberal states had reconfirmed to many within the Church the vital importance of the ancient belief of the central authority of the bishop of Rome as the successor of

St. Peter. Virtually no one in the hierarchy of the Church outright rejected the theological concept of papal infallibility – that when the Pope formally addressed matters of faith and morals as the Vicar of Christ, he was guided by the Holy Spirit and therefore not subject to error. However, it had never been clearly defined as to the extent of that infallibility and that is where true divisions existed. Examples were papal encyclicals such as the controversial *Syllabus of Errors* of Pius IX (1864) – was that an infallible papal statement, true for all times and for all people? Was every public statement of the pope to be considered infallible? The ultramontanes certainly believed so.

Pope Pius IX certainly leaned heavily toward the ultramontane definition of infallibility. Others, however, were far less certain. There were two prominent schools within the hierarchy, all in minority to the ultramontanes. There were some that rejected outright any definition of papal infallibility. While acknowledging the authority of the pope, they thought it theologically dangerous to attempt to define it. They believed that the authority of the Church had historically existed, that all Catholics believed it, and to define it would simply mean to limit it, or to misunderstand it. Others, called “inopportunists,” felt that in the disrupted state of the world at the time, it was not “opportune” to define papal infallibility. This was the position of Cardinal John Henry Newman of England, as well as a number of prominent American bishops. They believed that a definition would cause difficulties within the liberal democracies for the Church, as well as in relations with other Christian traditions. Finally, there were extreme anti-infallibilists such as Lord John Acton of England, a prominent Catholic layman, who dreaded any such definition.

Acton believed that a definition of papal infallibility would somehow contradict the historical fact

that there had been bad popes and bad decisions of the past. As with many critics of infallibility, he defined it in his own mind too broadly, assuming that papal infallibility applied to virtually any papal policy or papal pronouncement. Acton also believed that authority in the Church should be greatly limited. His teacher, the historian and theologian Father Ignaz von Dollinger, shared many of Acton's ideas. Both are heroes to Garry Wills in *Papal Sin*.

The general accusation – shared by Wills – was that the Council was manhandled by Pius IX and the Curia to force a definition of papal infallibility not in keeping with Catholic tradition. Yet even Acton, who loathed Pius and looked for curial conspiracies everywhere, had to acknowledge that debates were open and ideas freely exchanged. He wrote in his journal, "Nobody molested on account of hostile opinion. Letters carefully examined, and much espionage. But no serious hindrance put in the way of distributing documents, pamphlets, etc. Newspapers frequently stopped; but distributed to the bishops, so that their effect on the course of events was not prevented."²⁶ In fact, the debate over the definition of papal infallibility went on for months. And the final definition of papal infallibility fell far short of the desires of the ultramontanes. Consensus emerged, except for extremists on each side, which spelled out a definition of papal infallibility clearly in line with Church tradition and the theology of the papacy. The Council proclaimed no new teaching that extended papal authority beyond a point the Church had understood for centuries. Subsequent popes have issued one *ex cathedra* statement (Pope Pius XII defining Catholic teaching on the Assumption of Mary in 1950) and did so only after extensive consultation with the world's bishops. The definition of papal infallibility as determined by the First Vatican Council was not created or mandated by Pope Pius IX. It was a reaffirmation of a consistent teaching of the Church as subsequent history has clearly shown.

Wills and Cornwell then focus on the area of episcopal appointments, seeing this as a critical area in the late 19th and early 20th Century where papal juridical “control” of the local Church expanded enormously. Both see this as a nefarious plot to extend papal power. Cornwell: *“The ideology of papal primacy, as we have known it within living memory, is an invention of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.* (Italics his own for emphasis.) In other words, there was a time, before modern means of communication, when the pyramidal model of Catholic authority – whereby a single man in white robes rules the Church in a vastly unequal power relationship – did not exist...The more elevated the Pontiff, the smaller and less significant the faithful. The more responsible and authoritative the Pontiff, the less enfranchised the people of God, including bishops, the successors to the apostles...Pacelli, more than almost any other Vatican official of his day, helped to enhance the ideology of papal power.” [27](#)

The theory is that with the end of the Papal States in 1870, the Church attempted to replace its “temporal” power with spiritual authority. The practical means to do this was to artificially prop-up papal juridical authority through the definition of papal infallibility, wresting away from secular governments and local control the appointment of bishops, and enhancing the power of the Curia – as an extension of papal power – over local and national churches. This centralizing of power in Rome, particularly through control of the bishops, would create an alternative to the loss of temporal authority. Wills sees this “power grab” as a plot virtually from the earliest centuries of the Church that “lead papal Rome to acquire a monopoly over priestly ordination. That power was seized not from the people themselves but from political rulers who had, in time, assumed even greater control over the nomination and acclamation power of Christian communities...When ‘lay investiture’ controversies

arose, in later centuries, the power to ordain did not return to its original locus, the people of each community, but was wrested from secular rulers by an expanding and aggressive papacy."²⁸

Wills sees the First Vatican Council in 1870 and subsequent events as part of the whole: an attempt by the papacy and curialists to seize power through the control of the appointment of bishops and, therefore, priestly ordinations. Of course, Wills sees all Catholic history and belief as a manipulated series of events whose cumulative aim is the enhancement of papal power. Sacramental theology, Scripture, a male priesthood, priestly celibacy, Christ's atonement on the Cross, the Mass, Marian devotion – all become to Wills part of the "structure of deceit" that is fundamental to the Church. And at the heart of this structure of deceit is the papacy. The true Church, according to Wills, "would not bring in substitutes for the Holy Spirit, making the Pope the monarch of the Church...(Augustine) would have said that the new papal sin, of deception, is worse than the vivid sins of material greed, proud ambition, or sexual license. It is spiritual sin, an interior baffling of the Spirit's access to the soul. It is a cold act, achieved by careful maneuvering and manipulation, a calculated blindness, a shuttering of the mind against the light."²⁹

While Wills argues his point, and Cornwell sees Pacelli as the agent provocateur for amassing papal power even in the face of the Holocaust, both are reading evil into a centuries-long movement by the Church to free itself from local control. The "lay investiture" controversies were considered fundamental to reform of the Church. It was a centuries-long attempt to free the Church from the control of the local rulers, the single most critical cause of hierarchical and local Church scandal throughout history. It is true that the movement to secure the appointment of bishops exclusively through the Holy See is a development that

accelerated over the last quarter of the 19th and early 20th century. But the historical reasons for this are hardly the sinister plots suggested by Cornwell, Wills and, eventually, Carroll. The governments of Europe that, to varying degrees, still had power over the appointments of bishops had become aggressively secular. While this was never an issue in the United States, the Church had to establish its freedom from State control and dominance throughout Europe (The Austrian monarchy still had veto power over the election of popes in the early 20th century.) Additionally, the Holy See certainly provided a counterbalance for local Catholic populations and Church structures facing extensive restrictions and interference from the modern states. Securing the right to manage its own affairs, including the appointment of bishops, was far from creeping papal absolutism. It was, in fact, liberating the Church from State domination. (In our own day, this is still very much an issue, particularly in China, where the State refuses the right of the Vatican to appoint bishops and has set-up its own "Patriotic National Church.")

Of course, the point here is not to argue over the extent of legitimate papal juridical power within Catholic tradition, or over the definition of papal infallibility. Rather, it is to see these books for what they are: exploitations of the Holocaust to argue for a particular anti-papal viewpoint within the Church. Pope Pius XII is not the enemy, even though Cornwell paints him large. The enemy is Pope John Paul II, who Cornwell sees as "Pius XII Redivivus," and fears that a "papal autocracy, carried to the extreme, can only demoralize and weaken Christian communities." He sees the John Paul II model of the papacy as reaffirming "the right of the man in the white robe to rule autocratically from the apex, with a domineering Curia imposing conformity, and the diocesan bishops abdicating their proper authority and freedom. This vision of the Church is increasingly inimical to Christian ecumenism, insistently male-dominated and celibate.

Marian devotion prevails, with an emphasis on miraculous and gnostic-style revelation.”³⁰

Carroll’s book neatly sums-up the similar agenda of all three authors in his call for a Vatican III at the end of “Constantine’s Sword.”³¹ Again, a book that is sold and reviewed as an exploration of the roots of the Holocaust concludes with a litany of bromides for Church reform aimed at limiting the papacy and recreating Catholic theology, Scripture and belief to the author’s own liking. The purpose here, again, is not to argue with the author’s wants and desires. Rather, it is to reflect on the purpose of all three of these non-histories sold as histories that use Pius and the Holocaust to put forth their own anti-papal agenda for Church reform.

Carroll has written a 608-page book whose chronology begins with the founding of the future Jerusalem in the Middle Bronze Age and concludes with the beatification of Pope Pius IX by John Paul II in September 2000. He has put all this together as virtual introduction to the last 70-odd pages that outline his personal agenda for Church reform. Carroll argues that a Third Vatican Council is necessary because, reflecting Wills and Cornwell, the Second Vatican Council, a historic beginning, was undermined by Pope Paul VI, a “devoted factotum to Pius XII.”³² Pope Paul VI turned back the reforming trend of the Second Vatican Council, in a “program of medieval restoration” that “has been vigorously continued by Pope John Paul II.”³³

Carroll’s Third Vatican Council would address, among other items, the anti-Jewish texts of the New Testament that show that the Church, even in its first generation, was capable of betraying the message of Jesus. This would establish once and for all that ‘the Church as such’ can sin.”³⁴ Vatican III will then abandon the “primary-enforcing

ideas of Roman supremacy and papal infallibility.”³⁵ The “doctrine of papal infallibility amounts to the low point in the long story of patriarchy, a legitimization of Church exceptionalism, a reversal of the meaning that Jesus gave to ministry, and, finally, an abuse of power.”³⁶

Vatican III should have a “new Christology” that abandons concepts such as the immortality of the soul, or Christ’s death as atonement for sin. Freed from this and the papacy, the Church will be able “to embrace a pluralism of belief and worship, of religion and no religion, that honors God by defining God as beyond every human effort to express God.”³⁷ The Church in Vatican III will abandon “its internal commitment to methods that undergird totalitarianism”³⁸ The Church will embrace the democratic ideal and abandon “the idea that there is one objective and absolute truth, and that its custodian is the Church.”³⁹ Bishops should be chosen by the people, the whole clerical caste eradicated, and women ordained (though ordination to exactly what is never clarified).

Wills shares most of the same agenda. Cornwell defines his goals, in sympathy with “progressive” elements within the Church as: to “continue to declare that the Pope and the Curia have failed to apply the crucial decision of the Council for collegiality. They are happy to forgo the certainties of a pope who provides an infallible mechanism as the need arises. They deplore the machinery whereby the Pope intervenes to appoint bishops the world over, frequently against local wishes, for that is not the way in which colleges are formed or work. They want a Pope who will preside over the Church in charity as a final court of appeal. They argue that the modern ideology of papal power lacks tradition, that it rejects the historic wisdom and authority of the conciliar Church.”⁴⁰

In his 2001 book "Papal Primacy in the Third Millennium"⁴¹ Russell Shaw describes the movement within certain Catholic circles to "tame the pope." With varying degrees of radical approaches, he describes this movement as "removing authority from the papacy through a systematic program of decentralization, and vesting it in other places – the Synod of Bishops, national bishops' conferences, local or 'particular' churches (that is, dioceses), perhaps even other structures that don't yet exist. The watchwords of this decentralizing program are collegiality, subsidiarity, inculturation, pluralism, and – sometimes – democracy."⁴² Shaw cites Father Richard McBrien's 1973 book, "The Remaking of the Church" as an example of this post-Vatican II advocacy of limitations on papal authority. Father McBrien, sharing the disappointment of Wills, Carroll and Cornwell over two decades before their books were published, that the alleged promise of Vatican II had not been realized, advocated his own "Agenda of Reform."

As outlined by Shaw, Father McBrien recommended: "replace 'monarchical absolutism' in Church governance with 'some form of constitutionalism'; recognize the principle of subsidiarity in Church affairs; make national pastoral councils – such as the Dutch Pastoral Council – the policy-making bodies for the Church at the national and local levels; return to 'the ancient and longstanding practice of the election of bishops by the clergy and laity'; and much else."⁴³

In a more recent proposal, Shaw notes that an American group called the "Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church" and certain European Catholics proposed in 1999 a document to serve as a "constitution" for the Church. In addition to the usual call for women's ordination, "freedom of conscience" in matters of morality, and the right to divorce and remarry, the document defines a new structure for the papacy. According to Shaw, regarding

“Church governance, the constitution declares its unreserved commitment to subsidiarity, as well as to the principle that people in leadership positions should be elected for specific terms. ‘Representative councils’ made up of elected members are the ‘principal decision-making bodies’ at every level, international, national, diocesan, and local. For the universal Church, the constitution envisages a system whereby, every ten years, the national Councils would elect a five-hundred-member General Council responsible for ‘policies and regulations concerning doctrine, morals, worship, education, social outreach...Its co-chairpersons would be the pope and a layperson elected by the council. And what of the pope? The General Council is responsible for choosing him or her, although here the constitution grows unaccountably vague.”⁴⁴ This, essentially, is the same agenda for Cornwell, Wills and Carroll.

This anti-papal trilogy of books is not a serious exploration of the Holocaust or of the role of Pius XII during the war years. Instead, the purpose in these books is to set forth an agenda, already enunciated in 1973, for “taming the papacy.” These are books focused on internal Church disputes over theology and the juridical authority of the papacy. They are merely exploiting the Holocaust – without seriously reflecting on what Pius was able to accomplish – to argue Church politics and theology in the age of Pope John Paul II. Their enemy is actually not Pius XII, but the papacy.

SUMMARY POINTS

- John Cornwell’s “Hitler’s Pope,” Garry Wills’ “Papal Sin” and James Carroll’s “Constantine’s Sword,” have been influential in popularizing the view that Pope Pius XII was a silent witness to the Holocaust who did virtually nothing to help the Jews. At heart, these critics claim, Pius was more interested in maintaining

and reinforcing a developing papal absolutism than in facing the Nazis.

- Pius and the Holocaust are only tools for the unifying premise that underlies all three books: that the papacy itself is the primary target, both in general, and specifically the papacy of Pope John Paul II.
- All three books use Pope Pius XII, and exploit the Holocaust, as a means to make points in an internal Catholic debate over papal primacy – meaning the extent of papal juridical authority within the Church – and papal infallibility. To see any of these books as a serious investigation into Catholic-Jewish relations, and how the Church under Pius responded to the Holocaust, is to misunderstand their purpose.
- Pius XII was unpopular with certain circles for the anti-Stalinist, anti-Communist agenda of his post-war pontificate. The Church under Pope Pius XII was seen as the leading conservative force in post-war Europe. This was a period where leftist sentiments in the West were still tied to a flirtation with communism, if no longer supportive of Stalinism. In leftist academic circles, particularly in Italy in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, Pope Pius was seen as the standard-bearer for a political crusade, establishing the Church as a universal anti-Communist force.
- The general charges against Pius were that while he was not pro-Nazi during the war, he hated Bolshevism more than he hated Hitler. This lead him to ignore the fate of the Jews so Nazi Germany would not be demonized. It was claimed that the wartime pontiff's strategy was to maintain a strong Germany as a bulwark against communism.
- The 2000 interim report of the international Catholic-Jewish commission formed to study the Vatican role in the Holocaust, a group not in any way particularly friendly to the legacy of Pius, could find no such evidence of an anti-Soviet, pro-Nazi Vatican strategy

during the war. The sources for such theories, such as they exist, were generally Nazi wishful-thinking that hoped for Vatican support in the war once the Soviet Union became the enemy.

- The whole idea of the “silence” of Pius XII – whatever the alleged strategies behind it – is a misreading of history if meant to imply a lack of papal concern or actions on behalf of the Jews. What the Church was able to accomplish in World War II under the direction of Pius XII was what no other agency, government or entity at the time was able to accomplish: saving Jewish lives.
- It would not be until the papacy of Pope John Paul II that a stronger reaction began to develop against Pope Pius XII within certain Catholic circles. As is clearly seen in Cornwell’s book, that response against Pius generally developed out of a reaction against the papacy of Pope John Paul II.
- At the conclusion of “Hitler’s Pope,” Cornwell’s case against Pope Pius XII is revealed for what it is: an attack on the papacy as exercised by Pope John Paul II. Cornwell charges that “Pacelli’s monolithic pyramidal model of the Church has once again reasserted itself, and the metaphors of the ‘pilgrim Church on the move’ and the ‘People of God’ are seldom employed. Pluralism and collegiality are characterized as antagonistic to central authority.”
- Cornwell’s essential theory is echoed in both Wills and Carroll. “So what accounts not only for the silence of Pope Pius XII, but for Eugenio Pacelli’s complicity with Hitler in the early years?” Carroll asks, assuming both that alleged silence and alleged complicity. “The early years offer the clue, for it was then that Pacelli’s determination to put the accumulation and defense of papal power above everything else showed itself for what it was. Above the fate of the Jews, certainly, but also above the fate of the Catholic Church in Europe.” Wills portrays Pope Pius XII as perhaps an unwitting victim,

at best, of “structures of deceit” that force people to lie to defend papal authority.

- All three books reference their views on Pope Pius XII both forward to Pope John Pail II and back to Pope Pius IX (Pio Nono) and the First Vatican Council (1869-1870). That Council’s definition of papal infallibility is seen as the foundation of Pius’ alleged obsession with a monarchical papacy, and Pope John Paul II’s exercise of papal authority. All three authors tend to mix the issue of papal infallibility – the Catholic understanding that when the pope solemnly defines doctrine he speaks infallibly – with papal juridical authority, which is the extent of the papacy’s authority within the institutional Church over matters such as the appointment of bishops.
- The essential argument of each author is that Vatican I changed the Church by creating out of whole cloth a doctrine of papal infallibility that also greatly enhanced a centralization of juridical power within the Church under the papacy. It was the machinations of Pius IX, resenting the end of the temporal power of the papacy, which caused this allegedly revolutionary development. Pope Pius XII was raised in the Church in an atmosphere where this new papal power was being codified and confirmed. After Pius XII is gone, the Second Vatican Council is called by Pope John XXIII to limit this papal autocracy, but is undermined by both his death and his predecessor, Paul VI, who was trained under Pope Pius XII. Pope John Paul II is then portrayed as engaged in a complete dismantling of whatever reforms the Second Vatican Council managed to enunciate in the areas of collegiality.
- All of which is a simplistic reading of history tied to a fixation on the papacy and alleged papal power. This is why the authors feel little compunction exploiting the Holocaust for matters of internal Church debate. Their obsession is with the papacy as conducted

by Pope John Paul II who they tie intimately with Pius IX and Pius XII. Belittling Pius IX and tying Pope Pius XII directly to the Holocaust are means to an end: pushing a particular vision of Catholicism and the papacy to which Pope John Paul II stands in stark contradiction.

- The definition of papal infallibility as determined by the First Vatican Council was not created or mandated by Pope Pius IX. It was a reaffirmation of a consistent teaching of the Church as subsequent history has clearly shown.
- The theory the authors share is that with the end of the Papal States in 1870, the Church attempted to replace its “temporal” power with spiritual authority. The practical means to do this was to artificially prop-up papal juridical authority through the definition of papal infallibility, wresting away from secular governments and local control the appointment of bishops and establishing the Curia – as an extension of papal power – to limit the authority of the local churches. Wills sees this “power grab” as a plot virtually from the earliest centuries of the Church that “lead papal Rome to acquire a monopoly over priestly ordination.”
- Securing the right to manage its own affairs, including the appointment of bishops, was far from creeping papal absolutism. It was, in fact, liberating the Church from State domination.
- It is important to understand see these books for what they are: exploitations of the Holocaust to argue for a particular anti-papal viewpoint within the Church. Pope Pius XII is not the enemy, even though Cornwell paints him large. The enemy is Pope John Paul II, who Cornwell sees as “Pius XII Redivivus,” and fears that a “papal autocracy, carried to the extreme, can only demoralize and weaken Christian communities.”
- Carroll argues that a Third Vatican Council is necessary because, reflecting Wills and Cornwell, the Second

Vatican Council, a historic beginning, was undermined by Pope Paul VI, a “devoted factotum to Pius XII.” Pope Paul VI turned back the reforming trend of the Second Vatican Council, in a “program of medieval restoration” that “has been vigorously continued by Pope John Paul II.”

- The Church at Carroll’s Vatican III will abandon “its internal commitment to methods that under gird totalitarianism.” The Church will embrace the democratic ideal and abandon “the idea that there is one objective and absolute truth, and that its custodian is the Church.” Bishops should be chosen by the people, the whole clerical caste eradicated, and women ordained (though ordination to exactly what is never clarified).
- In his 2001 book “Papal Primacy in the Third Millennium,” Russell Shaw describes the movement within certain Catholic circles to “tame the pope.” With varying degrees of radical approaches, he describes this movement as “removing authority from the papacy through a systematic program of decentralization, and vesting it in other places.”
- As outlined by Shaw, Father Richard McBrien in 1973 recommended a “taming of the papacy” to include: “replace ‘monarchical absolutism’ in Church governance with ‘some form of constitutionalism’; recognize the principle of subsidiarity in Church affairs; make national pastoral councils – such as the Dutch Pastoral Council – the policy-making bodies for the Church at the national and local levels; return to ‘the ancient and longstanding practice of the election of bishops by the clergy and laity’; and much else.”
- An American group called the “Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church” and certain European Catholics proposed in 1999 a document to serve as a “constitution” for the Church. In this constitution, according to Shaw, representative councils “made up of

elected members are the 'principal decision-making bodies' at every level, international, national, diocesan, and local. For the universal Church, the constitution envisages a system whereby, every ten years, the national Councils would elect a five-hundred-member General Council responsible for 'policies and regulations concerning doctrine, morals, worship, education, social outreach...Its co-chairpersons would be the pope and a layperson elected by the council. And what of the pope? The General Council is responsible for choosing him or her, although here the constitution grows unaccountably vague." This, essentially, is the same agenda in spirit for Cornwell, Wills and Carroll.

- This anti-papal trilogy of books is not a serious exploration of the Holocaust or of the role of Pope Pius XII during the war years. Instead, the purpose in these books is to set forth an agenda, already enunciated in 1973, for "taming the papacy." These are books focused on internal Church disputes over theology and the juridical authority of the papacy. They are merely exploiting the Holocaust – without seriously reflecting on what Pope Pius XII was able to accomplish – to argue Church politics and theology in the age of Pope John Paul II.

FOOTNOTES

¹ *Hitler's Pope, the Secret History of Pius XII*, by John Cornwell (Viking Press, 1999)

² *Papal Sin, Structures of Deceit*, by Garry Wills (Doubleday, 2000)

³ *Constantine's Sword, The Church and the Jews*, by James

Carroll (Houghton Mifflin, 2001)

⁴ *Cornwell*, pp. 296-297

⁵ *Wills*, pp. 67, 68

⁶ *Carroll*, p. 681 footnote citation

⁷ *ibid.* p. 535

⁸ *ibid.* p. 534

⁹ Cornwell, a journalist by trade, claimed to have had unique access to archival material but the material he specifically cited as new has long been available – and both used and published – by students of the period.

¹⁰ Cornwell in *Hitler's Pope* describes *Der Stellvertreter* as "historical fiction based on scant documentation...(T)he characterization of Pacelli (Pius XII) as a money-grubbing hypocrite is so wide of the mark as to be ludicrous. Importantly, however, Hocchuth's play offends the most basic criteria of documentary: that such stories and portrayals are valid only if they are demonstrably true" (p. 375)

¹¹ *Cornwell*, p. 112, *Wills*, p. 35, *Carroll*, p. 511-512

¹² *Hitler, the War and the Pope*, by Ronald Rychlak (Our Sunday Visitor, 2000) p. 49

¹³ *Adolf Hitler*, John Toland (Ballantine Books, 1984) p. 549

¹⁴ For a detailed defense of the actions of Pius XII during World War II see The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights research paper, "Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust." For the most in depth book on the subject, see Rychlack's *Hitler, the War and the Pope*.

¹⁵ *Carroll* p. 44

¹⁶ *Cornwell*, p. 365

¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 369

¹⁸ *Carroll*, p. 533

¹⁹ *Wills*, p. 65

²⁰ *ibid.* p. 68

²¹ *Cornwell*, p. 11-12

²² *Wills*, p. 259

²³ *Carroll*, p. 558

²⁴ *ibid.* pp. 443-444

²⁵ *Cornwell*, p. 362

²⁶ Cited in *Lord Acton*, by Rolland Hill (Yale University Press, 2000) p. 407

²⁷ *Cornwell*, pp. 3, 4

²⁸ *Wills*, p. 154

²⁹ *ibid.* p. 312

³⁰ *ibid.* p. 370

³¹ *Carroll*, pp. 547-604

³² *ibid.* p. 551

³³ *ibid.* p. 552

³⁴ *ibid.* p. 556

³⁵ *ibid.* p. 575

³⁶ *ibid.* p. 576

³⁷ *ibid.* p. 587

³⁸ *ibid.* p. 589

³⁹ *ibid.* p. 591

⁴⁰ *Cornwell*, p. 370

⁴¹ *Papal Primacy in the Third Millennium*, by Russell Shaw (Our Sunday Visitor, 2001).

⁴² *Shaw*, p. 14

⁴³ *ibid.* p. 22

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 30