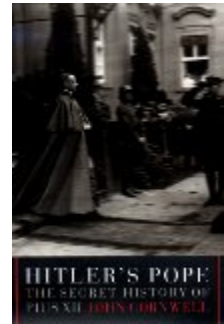


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Cornwell. *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*. New York: Viking, 1999. ix + 430 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-88693-7.

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Real Problems

Despite appearances, there really are two books lurking between the covers of John Cornwell's *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*. Unfortunately, these two books cannot easily coexist. In fact, it is precisely the strength of one part of the book which sabotages the second. The first part of the book is written by Cornwell, the Devil's Advocate, the second by Cornwell the talented journalist-historian. (Now abolished, the "Devil's Advocate" functioned in Catholic beatification proceedings as the one who would examine the evidence for canonization critically and adversarially).

On the first page of the book, Cornwell quotes Peter Gumpel, S.J., who functions as a sort of judge, supposedly impartial, in the cause of Pius's canonization, as follows: "The cause of the beatification and canonization of Pope Pius XII, who is rightly venerated by many millions of Catholics will not be stopped or delayed by the unjustifiable and calumnious attacks against this great and saintly man." Gumpel has in mind, among others, Guenther Lewy and Saul Friedlander. As that comment suggests, the impartiality of his judgments may be doubted.

For Cornwell, this is laying down the gauntlet, and he takes it up with great relish. And devastating success. However one comes out on the issue of what Pius did or did not do, what he should or should not have done, for potential victims of the Holocaust, Cornwell leaves little doubt that this pope should hardly be considered a candidate for canonization.

The canonization proceedings now underway (though presently stalled) in Rome are less about the

sanctity of Pius than about ecclesiastical politics. The proceedings, in fact, are much more about the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council and the future shape of the church. In Catholic parlance, that is, they are more about ecclesiology than the making of a saint. Put another way, those who want to sanctify Pius want to honor and, they hope, renew and perpetuate, a particular vision of the church that he did much to create and embody: papally monarchical and infallible, regally triumphalistic, blithely anti-pluralist, parochially Roman and Western, ecclesiologicaly pyramidal, institutionally preoccupied with doctrinal orthodoxy, instinctively countercultural and oppositionist, politically and socially detached (or "neutral") and arrogantly "anti-collegial" (i.e., autocratic in relations with local bishops).

The opposing camp, which Cornwell calls the "progressives," believe (and certainly not without foundation) that it is precisely this vision of the church that the Second Vatican Council was summoned to overturn and revise. Those Cornwell calls "traditionalists" argue that the Council was neither intended to achieve, nor succeeded in achieving, such a modernizing reversal.

Thus the traditionalists who are pushing the cause of Pius's canonization are locked in an intramural debate with the progressives over the meaning of the Second Vatican Council. For them, canonization would be a victory for Pius' vision of the church and a blow to the progressive vision of a collegial, liberal, ecumenical, tolerant church fully engaged in the world and less resolutely (and, they would add irrationally) opposed to almost ev-

everything “modern.”

Cornwell is firmly on the side of the progressives, and his book is an extensive brief on behalf of them, against Pius’s canonization and, above all, against his vision of the future of the church. Again, this essentially legal part of the book is carried off with crushing effectiveness. However, it is precisely this lawyerly vigor, and the prosecutorial zeal which drives Cornwell, that makes the book less satisfying as a balanced and complete historical account of Pius and the Holocaust. At its best, Cornwell, a brilliant prose stylist, presents a pope who is eminently unworthy of canonization. At its worst, though, the book is tendentious, anachronistic in its moral judgments, and often questionable, unnuanced or exaggerated in its historical judgments. Above all, it is – despite the titillating references to “secret” archives and new material – highly dependent in many of its chapters on already-published secondary literature.

I will start off, however, with a strength of the book, one that has been overlooked by virtually all of the many reviews which have appeared to date. Throughout the book, Cornwell alludes to, and in the fifteenth chapter discusses in detail, the “piety” or “spirituality” of Pius XII. To my mind, Cornwell is right to focus serious attention on this, odd as it is to late twentieth-century Catholics and, surely, odder still to non-Catholics. It may have been, in the end, his piety, which, to be sure, was shared by millions of pre-conciliar Catholics, as much as any other alleged factor – anti-semitism, impartiality, ignorance of the all the facts, what Saul Friedlander called “a predilection for Germany,” hatred and fear of communism – that accounted for his passivity and “silence.”

Cornwell describes Pius’ “spirituality” as individualistic and privatized. It was a piety that “proclaimed itself in constant opposition to the profane, the worldly.” Its roots deep in Augustinian theology, this sort of piety regarded the realm of spirit as the real, while this world, a “vale of tears,” “seemed,” in Cornwell’s apt words, “shadowy and ephemeral.” Cornwell is not wrong to describe this piety as essentially gnostic or dualistic, regarding this earthly realm as both less real and more evil than the true realm of eternal, heavenly goodness. Sometimes, as in times of war, this world gets so painful that human hearts turn, as Pius put it, from “the transitory things of earth to those which are heavenly and eternal.” As Cornwell, again correctly, points out, this “intensely private interiority” left no room for, or even recognition of, a doctrine of social responsibility. Being Christian, and especially being a saint, for Pius meant, above all, being

pious in the intense, private, interior style that Cornwell evokes so accurately.

It was disastrous, of course, to have a pope with this kind of piety in power at this precise moment in history. But, in a sense, the blame lies less with any particular individual than with a particular kind of Christian piety then widely popular throughout the world and by which Pius was deeply, if unfortunately, influenced. Cornwell himself states at one point that Pius’s failure to “respond to the enormity of the Holocaust” was in part a failure of the “prevailing culture of Catholicism. That failure was implicit in the rifts Catholicism created and sustained – between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the secular, the body and the soul” (p. 295).

These pages are among the most profound and most neglected in the book, but they point to a crucial point: one of the main reasons Pius was passive during the Holocaust was not that he wasn’t Christian enough; it was that he was too good a Christian, or, perhaps, too good a Gnostic. He was the kind of Catholic who could blithely finger his rosary, eyes gazing raptly toward the ethereal Blessed Mother, while the SS, who were all too real, were rounding up more than one thousand Roman Jews a few hundred yards away for deportation eastward. And he could do these things while still aspiring, and probably believing himself to be, “saintly,” or at least not failing at his job. That was not, to put it mildly, the kind of saint required for the times. But that, sadly, was the kind of man that Catholic piety could easily produce in early twentieth century Europe.

Detached in this pious sort of way, Eugenio Pacelli was still worldly enough as Vatican Secretary of State to have negotiated the Reich Concordat with Hitler. Cornwell argues that the Concordat fatally weakened the Catholic Center party (by forcing it to dissolve “voluntarily”) and thus neutralized all effective political opposition to him. While passionately argued, this part of the book is neither new nor completely convincing. (More than half of the footnotes in the two chapters on the Concordat begin with the words “Quoted in.” These chapters are heavily dependent upon important books by Scholder, Helmreich, Volk and Friedlander.)

And, like so much of the book, it subsides into speculation with an odd conviction of certainty. Really, it is impossible to say with any confidence that the Center Party or Catholics in general would have resisted Hitler had it not been for the Concordat. In fact, the Party had been sliding rightward even before 1933. After 1933, many Catholics partly out of weariness with political and

economic chaos kindled to Hitler's promises of order and to his denunciations of Communism. Many were all too ready to embrace, or at least tolerate, him by then. Not least of these were the German bishops, who were not nearly so resistant to the Concordat as Cornwell suggests. In fact, most were probably relieved to have an agreement that at least seemed to protect the interests and clarify the status of the church in Germany. It is also worth remembering that Pacelli was not free-lancing but acting on behalf of a sitting pope, Pius XI.

Cornwell's treatment of an earlier Concordat, with Serbia, is the one point where the book indisputably goes off the rails. In 1914, Pacelli concluded a Concordat intended to protect Catholic interests in Serbia. This so angered the Austro-Hungarians, Cornwell argues, that it, in effect, led to the First World War made it "inevitable" (p. 51) as Cornwell puts it. It may be true that war was inevitable, but the Concordat had nothing to do with it. Much more pertinent were numerous sources of tension between Vienna and Serbia, a complex network of alliances that guaranteed that, once begun, war would draw all in and, finally, an explosive event in the assassination of the Archduke in Sarajevo. To suggest Pacelli's Concordat played any role in leading the world to war is really quite odd.

Cornwell is not on much stronger ground when it comes to Pius's supposed anti-semitism. He rests much of his case on Pius's recorded observations, in 1919, of the radical uprising in Munich, which led, briefly, to the establishment of a Soviet-style republic. Deplorably, Pius described Max Levien, its leader, as a "Russian and a Jew. Pale, dirty..." Some of Levien's female fellow-travelers were, in Pacelli's words, "Jews like the rest of them." Looking back through the lens of the Holocaust, these words seem damnable, and of course, in a sense, they are. But it is crucial to observe that these words, reprehensible as they are, in no way can be connected with the Nazi genocidal project or later sympathy with Hitler, the Final Solution or racial, murderous antisemitism. These words instead were part of the odious, everyday, common antisemitism by which virtually all Catholics, and all Christians, were infected.

To say that Pacelli was an anti-Semite thus is not to say all that much. Clearly, he failed to transcend some of the evil and destructive cultural presuppositions of Christianity. If Cornwell is right to insist that this disqualifies him for canonization, he is wrong to imply that this made him an ideal candidate to be "Hitler's Pope" or a perfect collaborator in genocide.

Cornwell is stronger on the issue of the pope's "silence," though, here also, he tends to speculation. In his Christmas 1942 address Pius did refer, if obliquely, to the Final Solution and "those thousands who, without any fault of their own, sometimes only by reason of their nationality or race, are marked down for death or gradual distinction." Obviously, Pius did not explicitly mention either Nazis or Jews here. For Cornwell, this counts as a trivialization of the Holocaust, and that reference to "thousands" makes it hard to disagree with him here. (Though a document recently discovered in the National Archives seems to indicate Pius, if tragically and erroneously, believed reports of Nazi atrocities exaggerated.) Cornwell also argues that Pius thus gave comfort to Hitler and made complacent millions of consciences who might otherwise have been induced to resist, or at least not to cooperate with, Hitler's murderous plans. Mussolini himself dismissed the speech contemptuously for being laden with platitudes. All of this, Cornwell argues, made Pius "complicit" (p. 297) in genocide.

In his classic *Commentary* article of 1964, Guenther Lewy argued forcefully that an explicit denunciation over Vatican radio of Nazi atrocities by the pope would have been not only a moral but a practical triumph. Where BBC broadcasts, for example, might have been shrugged off as war propaganda, the Vatican would have been believed, and potential victims of the Nazis might have been emboldened to resist or not to board trains now that they knew from the pope and local bishops just what deportation meant.

Cornwell agrees with Lewy. While both may be right, it really is impossible to say with any certainty what sort of effect a public denunciation would have had. Some of Pius's defenders argue that such a denunciation would have made things worse for the Jews. (Though it really is hard to see how things could have gotten any worse than enforced ghettoization, deportation and gassing.) Still others argue that the Christmas message was perfectly understandable to those (like the editors of the *New York Times*, who praised Pius as virtually a lone voice against Hitlerism) who understood diplomatese.

Still others argue that other institutions, like the International Red Cross, maintained a prudent policy of discreet, behind-the-scenes diplomacy and aid. All were cautious about making provocative statements. Still others point out that the Allies, who had planes and bombs, did not make a priority of stopping Hitler's genocide.

Others argue that the view of Lewy exaggerates the power of the papacy to stop a genocidal maniac like

Hitler. Others point out that Pius did persuade Monsignor Tiso to take steps to save the Jews of Slovakia; that he was the first head of state to protest the deportation of Hungarian Jews (though, it should be pointed out, after many, many were deported); and that his representatives in Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria and elsewhere did much to protect Jewish life. (I happen to believe, though, that the majority of Jews saved by Catholic priests, nuns and lay people were not doing so in obedience to the presumed wishes of the pope but in spontaneous, independent reaction to atrocity and in unordered solidarity with imperilled Jews.)

Whatever one thinks of the arguments made by Pius's defenders, it is certain that a proper interpretation of Pius's "silence" requires recognition that he remained truly silent when thousands of Catholic priests, intellectuals and politicians were being tortured and murdered in Poland and when many Serbian Orthodox Christians were being viciously murdered by the nominally Catholic Ustasha regime. These massacres were accomplished with the aid of gun-toting Franciscan priests and accompanied by calls from some Croatian bishops for the forcible conversion of the Orthodox.

As Cornwell points out, the Vatican was extremely well-informed about the situation in Catholic Croatia. Again, Pius said nothing and, in this case, appears to have done nothing, either. This silence weakens Cornwell's arguments about the relationship of antisemitism and

Pius's silence about the Holocaust. Pius was perfectly capable of silence when fellow Catholics were being brutalized by Hitler or when Orthodox Christians were being massacred by Catholics.

In the end, then, Cornwell convincingly proves that Pacelli was no hero, no martyr and certainly no saint. What the world needed then was a prophet; what it got was a cautious, somewhat timid diplomat. But it is important to remember that there is no moral equivalency between a timid, inward-looking diplomat, on the one hand, and Hitler, Himmler, Heydrich, Eichmann and the rest on the other. These are the men who deserve all of the blame for the Holocaust. To shift the blame to the pope is to risk a real error in moral judgment.

Still, it is equally important to recognize that he was no saint. Canonizing Pius would be a mistake for many reasons. It would cheapen the sanctity of those who by the witness of their lives truly deserve to be canonized. More importantly, it would be disastrously insensitive to the many Jews who genuinely feel betrayed by Pius. One hopes that the Vatican will come to recognize that, if not diabolical like Hitler, Pius hardly provided a model of prophetic courage and moral outrage that would truly merit the recognition of a formal canonization.

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