H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ronald E. Modras. *The Catholic Church and Antisemitism: Poland, 1933-1939.* Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994. xvi + 429 pp. $48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7186-5568-7.

Reviewed by Neal Pease (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee)
Published on HABSBURG (April, 1996)

The Catholic Church and Antisemitism in Interwar Poland

This is a useful and stimulating contribution to scholarly discussion of one of the more controversial topics of modern Central European history: the extent and significance of antisemitism in Poland in the years preceding the Second World War, and the particular role of that country's Roman Catholic Church in shaping the attitudes of its Polish flock toward the substantial Jewish minority that dwelt in its midst.

Much is at stake here. The "Jewish question" plays a role in the histories of all lands of Central Europe, of course, but it gained particular intensity in the Polish lands, where Jews comprised one-tenth of the population and played a key role in economic and cultural life. Furthermore, the matter of Polish attitudes toward Jews became something of a litmus test in the vigorous discussions over *jaka Polska?*–"what sort of Poland?"–that accompanied the rise of Polish nationalism, pitting the vision of a modern reincarnation of the cosmopolitan and latitudinarian *Respublica* of old against a more restrictively defined homeland for Poles and Poles alone. Far more than any other issue, the charge of incorrigible antisemitism casts a shadow over the historical reputation of Poland and its culture and gives rise to the widespread belief that the Poles were at least spiritually complicit in the Holocaust that later took place on their soil. Through the years, this debate has been notorious for generating more heat than light, marked by recrimination, defensiveness, and liberal use of ad hominem argumentation. Despite a notable and welcome recent improvement in the level and tone of discourse, this remains a field in need of basic research and fair judgment, and only the brave are advised to enter.

This monograph by Ronald Modras helps that process along by providing, for the first time, an extended examination in English of the Polish Church and antisemitism in the interwar decades. For the most part, commentary on Catholicism and the "Jewish question" during the era of the independent Second Republic has tended to fall into two polarized camps, either attacking the Church as a blinkered, bigoted institution that actively fostered hatred of Jews, or defending it after a fashion as a moderating influence in an atmosphere of inflamed ethno-religious passions, constrained by Christian doctrine and scruples to reject the violence and racist extremism of the hard-core antisemitic right. Based on a survey of the Polish Catholic press of the day, Modras's study sidesteps these conventional pigeonholes and offers a balanced and thoughtful approach, presenting evidence and argumentation that challenges scholars to take a fresh, broader look at the subject.

His thesis, in sum, begins with the categorical statement that, yes, the Polish Church must be held largely responsible for encouraging, legitimating, or rationalizing hostility toward Jews during the runup to World War II, that "the Catholic clergy…were not innocent bystanders or passive observers of the wave of antisemitism that encompassed Poland in the latter half of the 1930s" (p. 396). He bases this conclusion on a persuasive mass of documentation drawn from Catholic newspapers and periodicals, polemics as well as published authoritative pronouncements. With few exceptions, the best that can be said of the Polish Catholic spokesmen and hierarchs of that time is that they bestirred themselves to disapprove only the vilest excesses of anti-Jewish thuggery in painfully qualified language while explicitly sanctioning more respectable forms of discrimination, such as economic boycotts, and routinely stigmatizing Jews as spiritual and political enemies. While recognizing that sensibilities have changed over time, and that this approach could pass for moderation in the context of the thirties, Modras makes plain his conviction that this does not amount to much of a defense. Again, that is the best that can be said; at worst, Catholic publicists dished out crude, sometimes vicious antisemitic invective that makes the reader squirm six decades after the fact. As for the ultimate, excruciating question–what did this have

to do with the Holocaust?–the author rightly states that "Christian antisemitism" bore no direct tie to the neopagan Nazi racism that reached fulfillment in the Shoah. But he adds his verdict that it acted as a tragic precursor, a *conditio sine qua non*.

At the same time, he continues, although Polish Catholicism was indeed antisemitic in any meaningful sense of the term, this was by no means a peculiarly Polish defect, but one common to the entire Church of the era before *Nostra Aetate*. He notes that the staple themes of Catholic antisemitic broadsides–economic parasitism, the purported Jewish link with communism, above all the obsessive belief in a Jewish alliance with Freemasonry to advance the assault of secular liberalism against the Church and all it held dear–were essentially no different in Poland than anywhere else, exhibiting few native characteristics that would have been unrecognizable to Catholics in, say, England or Italy. In other words, he might say, the distinctive thing about Catholic antisemitism in Poland was not so much that it was Polish as that it was Catholic. Along the way, Modras displays a perceptive sensitivity to the complexities and paradoxes of Polish civilization, an environment that could produce Catholic antisemites who nonetheless risked their lives to rescue Jews during the Nazi occupation, as well as St. Maksymilian Kolbe, the noble soul who died in another prisoner's place in Auschwitz but whose "Knights of the Immaculata" publishing house had churned out some of Poland's nastiest Jewbaiting rags in peacetime.

This worthy book is not without blemishes, so let us get these out of the way before giving Professor Modras his deserved commendations at the end. In the first place, the author, a theologian at St. Louis University, readily admits that he is not a specialist in Polish matters, and it shows to some extent. Aside from the good deal he has learned of Polish-Jewish relations, his grasp of the history of the Second Republic seems wooden and a trifle unsteady. For instance, the occasional name is misspelled, and the Pilsudski coup d'etat, the watershed of interwar Polish politics, is repeatedly misdated. While the years 1936-1939 were no bargain in many ways, to describe them as "among the darkest in modern Polish history" (p. 34) seems curious, especially in light of what was to come immediately afterward. One also might ask why Modras chose to focus on the years 1933-1939, a somewhat artificial periodization that corresponds with the era of prewar Nazi rule in Germany, to be sure, but that has no particular bearing on the Polish case, because the advent of Hitler did not much alter the terms of debate over the "Jewish question" in Poland, inside or out of Catholic circles. He might have done better to follow the example of other scholars and select 1935 as his starting point, the year of the death of Marshal Pilsudski and the subsequent revived dynamism of the Polish right, or to cover the entire interwar epoch.

On one occasion, the author seems to overstrain to push his point–otherwise well taken–that Polish Catholicism was little, if any, more disposed to antisemitism than the Catholic world as a whole; for he minimizes the significance of the celebrated 1938 statement of Pope Pius XI (formerly the nuncio to Poland, by the way) that Christians were "spiritual semites" and thereby forbidden to hate Jews, seizing on the technical ground that it was an off-the-cuff, unofficial remark. Even so, the facts remain that the pope said these words, that he took pains to make known that he had said them, and that they became the most famous he ever uttered, as Modras acknowledges. Does it really matter that much that they did not appear in any Vatican publication of record? Finally in this litany, we might wish that Modras had not limited himself to an examination of the press and had made wider use of other sources, even while admitting the validity of his claim that this method permits an accurate insight into Polish Catholic opinion. A more serious question is whether his findings might be skewed slightly–in tone, more than substance–by his heavy reliance on examples drawn from *Maly Dziennik* and *Rycerz Niepokolanej*. These mass market papers of Father Kolbe were noted for vociferous anti-Jewish diatribes, but were without influence on educated or elite circles.

These are all small things that might have been done better. Far more weighty, in my view, are the several big things that Modras does very well. Moreover, his theological background permits him to highlight nuances of Catholic thought and discourse that have eluded some others. For starters, he convincingly demonstrates, should anyone require convincing, that prejudice against Jews was indeed deeply embedded in the Polish Catholic culture of the early twentieth century. While it may have been more prevalent elsewhere, or more virulent, this was not thanks to the leadership of the Polish Church. Not many Catholics raised their voices against the spread of antisemitism. Those who did represented elements that, like as not, were out of step with the hierarchy, embodying trends in Polish Catholicism that would not come into their own until after the war, such as the *Odrodzenie* (Renaissance) group. In this respect at least, says Modras–with deliberate provocation, but no little justice–Polish Catholics were less "Christian" than their enemies of the secular left.

Second, he is correct to stress the degree to which

Catholic antisemitism of the day formed but one component of a profoundly defensive mentality that conceived of the Church as a beleaguered rampart under fire of the combined onslaught of liberalism, communism, Freemasonry, and Jewry, foes whose identities tended to blur and merge in the smoke of battle. This is a point that is vital for an understanding of the outlook of interwar European Catholicism and its political activity. It is too often overlooked or dismissed as mere rhetoric rather than the conviction it was. It in no way excuses or minimizes the antisemitism of Polish Catholics to say that it derived most of its energy from the notion of a desperate war to preserve "Christian culture" against the inimical forces of modern life, including but by no means limited to Jews.

Not least, Modras's book teaches a valuable lesson in its insistence on treating the Polish Church as an integral part of an international, avowedly universal institution, and in his finding that the attitudes of Polish Catholicism toward Jewish questions fell solidly within the Catholic mainstream of those times. Not only is he right on both counts, I think, but this approach has applicability beyond this particular work. All students of Polish church history should bear this in mind. It provides a needed corrective to the all too frequent tendency to regard Polish Catholicism as an isolated phenomenon, unique and eccentric, so decisively formed (or deformed, according to some) by national issues, traits, and phobias as to constitute a great exception. In fact, this is not at all the case. Of course, Modras does not hold that Catholicism in Poland is no different than in other lands, or that antisemitism was exactly the same in all Catholic lands, but simply stresses that the similarities were more compelling than the differences, that as regards the *sprawa zydowska* the Polish acorn did not fall far from the Catholic oak. This argument is well defended, as are the others that make up the heart of this book. Those virtues, as well as the author's rare blend of judgment, balance, and humane spirit, should secure his book a durable position on the lists of recommended works on the history of Polish-Jewish relations, the Polish Church, and modern antisemitism alike.

Citation: Neal Pease. Review of Modras, Ronald E., *The Catholic Church and Antisemitism: Poland, 1933-1939.* HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. April, 1996.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=418