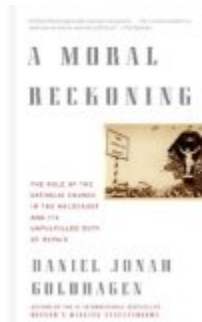


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel Goldhagen. *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. 362 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-71417-7; \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-41434-3.

Reviewed by Mark Ruff (Concordia University, Portland)
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Six years ago, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, a young Harvard political scientist, ignited a historical controversy with his book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. He asserted that “ordinary Germans” eagerly took part in a national crusade to eliminate Jews because of widespread anti-Semitism, not peer pressure, coercion, or ignorance. His charges provoked anguished soul-searching in German historical circles, and Goldhagen became something of a folk-hero for younger Germans keen on assigning blame for the Holocaust to their grandparents’ generation. While he received Germany’s prestigious Democracy Prize in the process, numerous critics assailed his one-dimensional explanation for the Holocaust and accused him of reviving old-fashioned allegations of collective guilt.

In an effort to rebut these critics, Goldhagen has since reached for bigger fish. In his latest book, *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair*, he takes his moral hammer to the Catholic church. For centuries, he argues, anti-Semitism was an integral part of Catholic doctrine; such teachings originated in the Gospels, which portray the Jews as the killers of Christ, “the minions of the devil” (p. 37). Popes Pius XI and XII inherited this tradition and were anti-Semites (p. 141). Not only did they fail to oppose National Socialism, but their servants elsewhere in Europe—nuns, priests, bishops, and ordinary parishioners—were thus complicit in the Holocaust.

Yet the firestorm which did ensue did not have exactly the result that he intended. His polemic triggered blistering reviews and a legal action in Germany, the result of slapdash scholarship and overblown moralizing. One infamous photo bears the caption, “Cardinal Michael Faul-

haber marches between rows of SA men at a Nazi rally in Munich” (p. 178). In fact, the churchman in the photo was not Faulhaber but a papal nuncio, Cesare Orengio, the location Berlin, not Munich. This error led the archdiocese of Munich to seek an injunction against the German publisher, a subsidiary of Bertelsmann, with a possible fine of up to \$250,000. Now, little more than one year after its publication, *A Moral Reckoning* seems destined for theological and historical oblivion. If anything, his work has set back the cause of those who seek a greater confrontation of the past by current church leaders, Goldhagen’s supposed reason for writing this tome.

Why should such a provocative work so signally fail in virtually every one of its claims? In no small measure, its manner of genesis virtually guaranteed its implosion. The editor of *The New Republic* asked Goldhagen to review a number of recent books on the relationship between Pius XII and the Holocaust. As he read the nearly dozen books on the subject, most by authors such as Susan Zucotti, Michael Phayer, Garry Wills, James Carroll, David Kertzer, and John Cornwall, who have written critically on the church’s conduct during this era, he began to sculpt a book-length manuscript on his central question, “What must a religion of love and goodness do to confront its history of hatred and harm, and to perform restitution?” What should have remained an extended essay became an unwieldy 300-page tome, one replete with redundancies, turgid prose, definitions that are self-referential, and passages that are out of sequence. To provide but one example: “When a person is described as an anti-Semite, or a statement as anti-Semitic, it does not necessarily mean that either *the way in which he or the statement is anti-Semitic or the quality of the anti-Semitism is the same as the manner of quality of the anti-*

Semitism of other people or statements” (Goldhagen’s italics, p. 23).

More damaging is the fact that Goldhagen brought no original research to this book. He took instead the contentions of the above-mentioned authors at face value and expressed them in even more strident form. In so doing, he fashioned a manuscript that superficially spans two millennia. He appears utterly ignorant of questions of biblical exegesis and problems of translation. To quote his central assertion: “The Christian Bible’s message has remained the same since its text was codified. And its message is unmistakable: The Jews killed the son of God who is God. All Jews are guilty of this crime. Because Jews do not hear Jesus, they do not hear God. For their rejection of Jesus, they are to be punished. Jews, the willful spurners of Jesus, cannot gain salvation, cannot go to heaven. And their religion, which cannot bring them to salvation, has been made invalid, superseded, replaced by Christianity” (p. 267). To make this claim, he cites passages where John the Baptist attacks the Pharisees and Sadducees as “you brood of vipers.” Goldhagen’s formulation: “Matthew tells of John the Baptist dubbing the Jews, called Pharisees and Sadducees, ‘you brood of vipers’” (p. 263). He ignores the fact that Jewish life in the first century was sectarian: John was an apocalyptic prophet, attacking members of other Jewish sects. To characterize the Pharisees and the Sadducees as “the Jews” completely overlooks the points that Christianity began as a Jewish movement and that first-century Judaism was pluralistic. The Jerome Biblical Commentary, the single-volume commentary on the whole Bible most widely used by Catholic scholars, which has been used since 1968, puts the burden for the death of Jesus on certain Jewish leaders in collusion with Roman authorities. It was the Romans, moreover, who executed Jesus: crucifixion was a uniquely Roman form of capital punishment. And so Goldhagen dismisses any distinction between anti-Semitism, as an ethnic and racial notion, and anti-Judaism, as an inter-Jewish dialogue taking place between the emerging Christian communities and Pharisaic Judaism. (He continually places the word “anti-Judaism” in quotation marks.)

He similarly distorts another passage from Matthew, from what he calls Matthew’s “infamous and fictitious crucifixion scene, in which the entire Jewish people willingly pronounce the guilt for Jesus’ death upon themselves and upon their descendents, in other words, upon Jews for all time” (pp. 263-264). Some commentators, in marked contrast to Goldhagen’s interpretations, insist that “his blood” can actually refer to forgiveness. Other

traditions stress that all human beings—and not the Jews—bear the responsibility for Christ’s death, the price of original sin. Even more significantly, can those clamoring for the death of Christ be equated with the entire Jewish population in the ancient world? How many “Jews” were even present in this crowd?

Goldhagen’s attempts to link the anti-Semitic foundational biblical texts to the anti-Semitism of the Middle Ages to the complicity in the Holocaust invariably fall by the wayside. Instead of painting 2,000 years of history under one brush, he should instead have posed a more differentiated question: why did a religiously based anti-Semitism emerge at certain times and certain places, and less so at other times and locations? Even concerning the twentieth century, he conflates the behavior of the Catholic church in all European nations, East and West, never acknowledging that nationality may have been a more important factor than religion in shaping the conduct of churchmen. Goldhagen cites a number of horrific expressions of anti-Semitism by prominent churchmen in Croatia, Poland, and Slovakia, and on these points he is correct—there were a number of churchmen who were anti-Semitic. But he glosses over the efforts of the Dutch clergy to oppose Nazi policies of annihilation as well as Angelo Roncalli’s (later Pope John XXIII) rescue of nearly 25,000 Jews. Why were these leading clergy not rabidly anti-Semitic, if their foundational texts were as anti-Semitic as Goldhagen insists? Why was German Protestantism far more important in shaping Nazism than Catholicism? Goldhagen himself is even aware of this, pointing out that Streicher underscored the influence of Luther on his own vitriolic anti-Semitism (p. 163).

Explaining such positions would seem to be Goldhagen’s understanding of the church not primarily as a religious, but as an authoritarian political, institution. According to the author: “The Church has a state, vast material holdings, formal diplomacy; it makes treaties of cooperation and has more than one billion adherents. Its doctrine, like the ideology of a state, is political, and it has consequences who are not Catholic. Historically, the Church has been animated by an analogue of aggressive nationalism, preaching exclusivity, a conquering imperialism of the soul, and disdain and hatred of others, particularly Jews” (p. 96). Similarly, “[b]ut to the professional experts on politics, it is incontestable that the Catholic Church is a political institution and should be analyzed and treated as such.” This, again, is a half-truth, for the church’s influence stemmed not from its economic power or territorial status but rather from its adherents. In light

of this understanding of the church, it would be interesting to note how Goldhagen would respond to Stalin's famous quip, asking how many divisions the church could muster. Yet Goldhagen wants to have his cake and eat it, too. In other places, he judges the church as a moral institution, holding it to an even tougher standard, in light of its claim to be "unfailingly holy" and servant of God.

Other aspects of this book evoke an almost surreal reaction. Laudatory comments on the back of this book's cover jacket refer to *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, not his current subject. A caption to a rather curious photograph featuring a sign and several houses in a flat landscape reads: "During the war a sign at the entrance to a Dutch town declares, 'Jews not welcome'" (p. 144). How this photograph advances his thesis (no church is to be seen in the background or foreground here) is left to the readers' collective imaginations.

Perhaps most bizarre is Goldhagen's insistence that the church should make restitution for its moral bankruptcy during the years of National Socialist rule by excising all anti-Semitic passages from the New Tes-

tament. It should "[d]eclare these falsehoods false and sinful, and remove them from the text" (p. 274). Would other Christian denominations follow suit? The Catholic Church should call for a "public convocation of all Christian churches in a collective effort to resolve the problem of the Christian Bible's anti-Semitism" (pp. 275-276). This flight into fantasy only underscores the hollowness of what often seems to be a badly written piece of pulp (non)fiction. One is left with the impression that Goldhagen objectifies the Catholic church (and Christianity) in much the same manner in which he accuses the church of doing so to Jews. This is a shame, for this powerful subject—the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Holocaust—deserves much more careful and nuanced scrutiny.

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