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The Historian as Judge

GAVRIEL D. ROSENFELD

IN THE YEAR 1824, the patriarch of the modern Western historical profession, Leopold von Ranke, became embroiled in a famous debate with another historian, Heinrich Leo, over a profound matter of historical methodology. Ranke had just published his first book, the *Histories of the Romanic and Germanic Peoples from 1494 to 1514*, in which he made the bold declaration that the controversial political philosophy of Nicolò Machiavelli, as set forth in his famous book *The Prince*, should not so much be condemned as understood as the product of its particular historical circumstances. As Ranke declared in a remark that was to become a maxim of modern historical scholarship, the task of the historian was not to “judge the past,” but “merely to show what happened” (“wie es eigentlich gewesen [ist]”).¹ Heinrich Leo disagreed, and in a critical review of Ranke’s book argued that Machiavelli needed to be seen as an amoral individual who had flirted with evil ideas and who should be viewed from an ethical perspective in order to appreciate his status as a figure of world historical importance. It was not sufficient merely to show what happened in the past, Leo concluded, the historian also had to judge it.²

As is well known, Leo’s criticism of Ranke did little to prevent the latter from going on to become one of the giants of Western historiography. But the basic issue at the core of the debate between the two scholars has become fundamental to all subsequent historical writing in the modern era: is the historian’s primary task historical explanation or historical judgment? Both strategies possess merits, of course, but they also entail various risks. Historians who set out to explain the past pride themselves on adhering to certain norms of scholarly objectivity; but they frequently end up producing sterile histories lacking in both moral resonance and relevance for present-day society. By the same token, historians who set

1. Cited in Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Hanover, N.H., 1983), 67.

2. For a brief discussion, see Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, 65–69.

out to judge the past may self-righteously believe in their present-day relevance, but they can easily end up distorting and misunderstanding the historical record by anachronistically applying contemporary moral standards to it. Most historians, of course, attempt to avoid the twin pitfalls of objectively neutering the past and subjectively caricaturing it by pursuing a careful brand of balanced scholarship. Then again, there are always exceptions.

The title alone of Daniel Goldhagen's new book, *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair*, leaves little doubt as to where he stands on the question of the historian's primary duty.³ Like his first book, the controversial 1996 bestseller, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, *A Moral Reckoning* is full of passionate indictments and moral judgments.⁴ It does not so much provide a description of the Catholic Church's complicity in the Nazi genocide of the Jews (and its difficult struggle after 1945 to atone for it) as offer an elaborately constructed analytical framework for subjecting the Church's actions and inactions to moral evaluation. This enterprise is an ambitious and, in certain ways, admirable one. Yet Goldhagen's lopsided focus on ethical judgment at the expense of historical explanation ultimately makes his work fail. Indeed, after completing *A Moral Reckoning*, many readers will emerge more confused than ever about how to understand—let alone judge—the Catholic Church's role in the Holocaust.

Right from the beginning of *A Moral Reckoning*, Goldhagen's moralistic approach reveals a pronounced tendency toward distortion. He writes with missionary fervor about the importance of a moral vision. "We . . . ought to turn moral inquiry into a valued activity," he declares. "It is our right to judge. . . . [It] is our duty to judge" (p. 15). As is true of many moral crusaders, however, Goldhagen's urgent sense of mission leads him to exaggerate the significance and novelty of his cause. In attempting to explain the necessity of a moralistic turn, he makes the sweeping claim that "sustained . . . moral judgment . . . is not in vogue" in contemporary society—elliptically blaming the existence of a "pluralistic world" for the fact that "people have become skittish about applying serious moral discussion to the public sphere" (pp. 6–7).⁵ In addition to making this ques-

3. Daniel J. Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair* (New York, 2002).

4. Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996).

5. In fact, many would argue the opposite—namely, that morality is too omnipresent as a concern in contemporary culture (at least in the United States). The controversy over President Clinton's sexual escapades and the ongoing politiciza-

tionable claim, Goldhagen even more incomprehensibly diagnoses the existence of “a moral blackout . . . in the discussion of the Nazi period,” declaring vaguely that “for a long time people failed to investigate and publicly discuss . . . the relevant moral issues intensively if at all” (p. 8).⁶ Goldhagen makes this point in order to highlight, in self-aggrandizing fashion, the significance of his first book, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, the originality of which he was widely criticized for having exaggerated already at the time of its publication.⁷ It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that he goes on to assert the same degree of unwarranted originality for *A Moral Reckoning*, whose value he affirms by making the misleading claim that “when it comes to the Holocaust people are skittish about judging the Church and its members” (p. 15). In fact, recent years have witnessed a deluge of new academic studies on the role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust.⁸ Goldhagen does acknowledge the existence of this litera-

tion of abortion are but two prominent examples. Moreover, the moral relativism that emerged in the wake of postmodernism has all but been rejected by the vast majority of centrist and conservative-leaning Americans, a fact reflected in the heated debate over multiculturalism in the last decade. In short, while Goldhagen’s claim has a certain plausibility, it is far from representing the whole picture.

6. This may have been true up until the early 1960s but certainly does not apply since then. Most academic scholarship on the subject of the Third Reich and the Holocaust (the vastness of which precludes listing examples here) has been defined by a clear moral thrust—though more subtle, to be sure, than Goldhagen’s extremely overt variety. To cite merely one concrete example: much of the literature on the Allied response to the Holocaust (whether refugee policy or the failure to bomb Auschwitz) has been extremely moralistic in tone. See, for example, David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941–1945* (New York, 1984), and Arthur Morse, *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* (New York, 1968). Or similarly, on the failure of the Allied reconstruction policy in postwar Germany, see Tom Bower, *The Pledge Betrayed: America and Britain and the Denazification of Post-War Germany* (New York, 1982), and Christopher Simpson, *Blowback: The First Full Account of America’s Recruitment of Nazis and Its Dismal Effect on our Domestic and Foreign Policy* (New York, 1988).

7. See Gavriel Rosenfeld, “The Controversy that Isn’t: The Debate over Daniel J. Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* in Comparative Perspective,” *Contemporary European History* 8:2 (1999): 258. One indication of Goldhagen’s tendency toward self-promotion is his citation in *A Moral Reckoning* (298) of his own web site as a source: www.goldhagen.com.

8. The most important works include John Cornwell, *Hitler’s Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (New York, 1999); Susan Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy* (New Haven, 2000); James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History* (Boston, 2001); Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1950–1965* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000); Gary Wills, *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit* (New York, 2000); David Kertzer, *The Popes*

ture and relies upon it nearly exclusively throughout the book. Unlike *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, which incorporated extensive archival research, *A Moral Reckoning* is based entirely on secondary sources and therefore should be seen as a work of synthesis geared toward a popular audience.⁹ In short, by contending that his topic has been insufficiently explored, Goldhagen exhibits a familiar tendency to break down open doors.

In and of itself, of course, the fact that Goldhagen has been preceded by numerous other scholars who have explored the Catholic Church's role in the Holocaust does not detract from his narrative's many strengths. Major portions of *A Moral Reckoning* are quite powerful and present a well-documented and largely convincing case against the Catholic Church. This is particularly true of the book's first two sections, entitled "Framing the Problem" and "Judging the Culpability." Although Goldhagen repeats himself often in these awkwardly organized sections, he persuasively demonstrates the Church's complicity in the Holocaust through various acts of omission and commission. Goldhagen is particularly adept (though hardly original), for example, in faulting Pope Pius XII for his silence in the face of the Holocaust. He dismisses the many claims made by the Pope's defenders that speaking out would have made matters worse for both the Papacy and the Jews themselves, pointing out, for instance, how protests of the Protestant clergy in Denmark helped protect Danish Jews from the Nazis' clutches and revealing how Pius XII remained silent even *after* the Nazi occupation of Rome had ended (he refrained from protesting the Nazis' deportation of Trieste's Jews in June of 1944 despite a newly gained position of security) (pp. 45–57). Besides pointing to the guilt of the Pope, Goldhagen describes the active collaboration of the national churches in the Final Solution in such places as Slovakia, Croatia, and Hungary, where various clerical and political elites—most notably, the Catholic priest and president of Slovakia, Josef Tiso—actively participated in the persecution, dispossession, and ultimately murder of Jews. Whether through silence or active participation, Goldhagen correctly shows that the Catholic Church was deeply complicit in the Nazi genocide.

against the Jews: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism (New York, 2001). Defenders of Pius XII include Margherita Marchione, *Pope Pius XII: Architect for Peace* (New York, 2000), and Pierre Blet, *Pius XII and the Second World War* (New York, 1999).

9. The book, indeed, originated as a review essay for *The New Republic*, whose editor, Martin Peretz, encouraged Goldhagen to expand it into a book. Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning*, 31.

Goldhagen is on more shaky ground, however, when probing the central question of *why* the Catholic Church was so complicit in the Holocaust. In pursuing the question of motivation, he not surprisingly resurrects the thesis of *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, declaring that it was the presence of "eliminationist antisemitism" within the church that explains the collaboration of Catholics in the extermination of the Jews (p. 25). In offering this thesis, Goldhagen once again tends to exaggerate his own originality, claiming a "general neglect" among Holocaust scholars of the Church's anti-Semitism, only to immediately thereafter draw upon the work of scholars such as James Carroll and David Kertzer to show how traditional Christian anti-Judaism not only helped to pave the way for, but also gradually melded with, modern political and racial anti-Semitism. Even if it is not particularly original, Goldhagen's point here is strongly argued; far from simply reiterating the age-old myth that the Jews were Christ-killers, Goldhagen shows that the Catholic Church embraced distinctly modern anti-Semitic views of Jews. Thus, for decades beginning in the late nineteenth century, the prominent Jesuit periodical *Civiltà cattolica* consistently described the Jews in racial terms as immoral degenerates, and political terms as subversive communists (pp. 79–80). Well into the 1930s such claims were still being articulated by leading clerics throughout Europe, such as Polish Cardinal August Hlond, who in 1936 issued a pastoral letter, "On the Principles of Catholic Morality," in which he declared that

so long as Jews remain Jews, a Jewish problem exists and will continue to exist. . . .

It is a fact that Jews are waging war against the Catholic Church and that they are steeped in free-thinking, and constitute the vanguard of atheism, the Bolshevik movement, and revolutionary activity. It is a fact that Jews have a corruptive influence on morals and that their publishing houses are spreading pornography. It is true that Jews are perpetuating fraud, practicing usury, and dealing in prostitution (p. 104).

The prevalence of such nakedly anti-Semitic statements by European clergymen emboldens Goldhagen to make several sweeping conclusions: first, that "virtually all Catholic clergy and a large percentage of their parishioners held the Jews to be guilty of grave crimes and offenses" (p. 103). And second, that the belief in Jewish guilt led Catholics to welcome the Nazi assault upon the Jews when it finally came. Goldhagen thus calls it "unremarkable" that the Church aided "[the Nazis'] elimina-

tionist measures . . . [and did] not themselves defend, or urge Catholics to defend, the Jews from . . . legal and physical assault" (pp. 112–13). Goldhagen concedes that Catholics primarily supported the Nazis' revocation of Jewish emancipation and balked at the more lethal measures adopted by the Nazis in the Final Solution, but even after the Nazis proceeded on their path toward mass murder, he notes, church leaders "could not bring themselves to declare . . . what needed to be told to everyone, namely, that the Jews were innocent. They could not in their hearts blame those people who genuinely believed, as the churchmen themselves did, in the Jews' extreme guilt but who, acting on their shared beliefs, went too far in meting out punishment" (p. 113). In the end, for Goldhagen, the Church's silence not only suggests "the absence of disapproval" toward the Nazis' treatment of the Jews (p. 158),¹⁰ it further leads to the inescapable conclusion that the "Church's antisemitism itself was a necessary cause of the Holocaust" (p. 174).¹¹

However plausible the claim may sound, Goldhagen's charge that the Catholic Church's anti-Semitism explains both its silence toward, and active participation in, the Holocaust is unsatisfying in several ways. For one thing, there is the conceptual muddiness of Goldhagen's core concept. Throughout *A Moral Reckoning*, Goldhagen describes Catholic anti-Semitism as "eliminationist," which he defines as "the desire, by some means . . . to rid society of Jews and . . . their . . . influence" (p. 123). In using this term, however, he places Catholic anti-Semitism in such close proximity to Nazi anti-Semitism (which he described in identical "eliminationist" terms in *Hitler's Willing Executioners*) that the considerable distinctions between them start to blur. While this is problematic in and of itself, it is especially so since it contradicts Goldhagen's own claims in *Hitler's Willing Executioners* that the eliminationist anti-Semitism behind the Holocaust was uniquely German.¹² By portraying both the Catholic Church and the Nazis as sharing the same eliminationist anti-Semitism, Goldhagen not only undermines the thesis of his first book (especially regarding German uniqueness) but weakens his overall explanation for the Holocaust. To explain the Holocaust, one needs to be able to explain

10. As he concludes, "when thousands of bishops and priests do not protest . . . one of the most insistent . . . moral issues of the day, it is reasonable to conclude that they did not disapprove."

11. The "hatred of the Jews in many countries derived to a large extent from the Church's teachings . . . and was motive enough for many Croats, French, Lithuanians, Poles, Slovaks, and others to help the Germans . . . once [they] . . . brought their eliminationist onslaught to those countries."

12. "German antisemitism was *sui generis*." *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 419.

the decision of the state to adopt a program of mass murder. Goldhagen wants to assign the primary blame for the Holocaust to eliminationist anti-Semitism, but in *A Moral Reckoning*, he stresses that the means used by the supporters of eliminationist anti-Semitism to rid society of Jews need “*not necessarily* [be] lethal” (p. 123, my emphasis). Framed in these terms, the idea of eliminationist anti-Semitism loses considerable power as what he calls “the central motive for the Holocaust” (p. 123). To be sure, in saying this, Goldhagen is not claiming that eliminationist anti-Semitism (either of the Church or the Nazis) was a “sufficient cause” of the Holocaust; there also needed to exist an authority willing to carry out such a murderous program.¹³ Here, though, the concept of “eliminationist antisemitism” elides more than it illuminates, for Goldhagen concedes that, in stark contrast to the Nazi regime, the Church would not and could not have “initiated and carried out a program for the annihilation of the Jews” (p. 175). If the Church differed so markedly from the Nazi regime in terms of institutional willingness to act upon their allegedly shared “eliminationist antisemitism,” clearly the concept is conceived much too broadly and does not begin to explain the reasons why the Nazis took the fateful step that the Church never did.

The concept of eliminationist anti-Semitism is especially problematic when applied so broadly to the Church because it fails to explain the cases when Catholics moved to rescue Jews from the clutches of the Nazis. Goldhagen is well aware of the attempts of the Church to intervene on behalf of Jews during the war years and he offers compelling evidence that, at least in the case of Papal protests—such as the statements of Pius XII against the deportation of Slovakian and Hungarian Jewry after mid-1944—they were belated, insignificant gestures calculated largely to preserve the Church’s postwar reputation (pp. 167–68). At the same time, however, Goldhagen is ill-equipped to explain the cases where ordinary Catholics rescued Jews. If, indeed, the Catholic Church’s anti-Semitism was such a crucial factor for the Holocaust, why did many inhabitants of the predominantly Catholic nation of Italy (whether bu-

13. Goldhagen recognizes this, but his schematic description of the factors necessary to commit genocide is so general as to verge on being tautological. Thus, he writes: “for a large program of mass murder to occur, two factors are necessary but neither one is sufficient: a political leadership that initiates and organizes the mass murder, and people willing to implement its policies. Either one . . . without the other . . . does not lead to large scale-mass murder” (*A Moral Reckoning*, 73). To say the least, this explanation simply states the obvious—that people perpetrate mass murder when they want to and can—but illuminates little about motives and decisions.

reaucrants, military men, or simple peasants and townspeople) go out of their way to rescue Jews during the war years?¹⁴ Goldhagen attempts to categorize the moral culpability of the Church for the Holocaust with the term “incitement,” and there is a certain degree of legitimacy to the charge (pp. 162–65). Yet the willingness of the Catholic laity in Italy to rescue Jews suggests that the long tradition of Catholic anti-Semitic incitement may well have fallen on deaf ears. If true, this fact would force Goldhagen to rethink his overly simplistic notion that “the antisemitism that the Catholic Church had . . . taught throughout Europe was a powerful motivator for Catholics to perpetrate anti-Jewish action” (p. 165). Why so many people seem to have been immune or indifferent to such officially sanctioned Church anti-Semitism needs further investigation. Rather than reducing popular indifference or resistance to the Holocaust primarily to the factor of Church-mandated anti-Semitism, additional circumstances, many at the local level, clearly need to be considered to arrive at an understanding of how Christians throughout Europe responded to the Nazi genocide.¹⁵ Indeed, Goldhagen would be well advised to follow the model of *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* and investigate the motives of “ordinary” Catholics, rather than merely the Church leadership.

Where *A Moral Reckoning* fails most dramatically at fostering historical understanding, however, is in its final section, entitled, “Repairing the Harm.” Here, Goldhagen ceases to act as a historian entirely and assumes the garb of lawyer and theologian in the attempt to offer a series of prescriptive recommendations for how the Church can provide restitution for its past misdeeds. To be sure, many of Goldhagen’s recommendations in this section are perfectly reasonable. Included among them are his requests for the Church to admit its unsavory postwar role in helping Nazi perpetrators like Adolf Eichmann, Klaus Barbie, and Josef Mengele find refuge in Latin America; for the Vatican to open up its archives in order to shed light on its behavior during the Holocaust; and more broadly for the Church to subject itself to a greater degree of critical scrutiny for its past misdeeds. More unrealistic, by contrast, are his demands for the Church to dissolve itself as a political institution by ending its diplomatic relations with other states; for it to consider purging all of the anti-Semitic utterances from the Christian Bible; and for it to refashion its basic super-

14. This trend is amply documented by Jonathan Steinberg in *The Axis and the Holocaust, 1941–45* (New York, 1990).

15. The classic cases of nations that rescued Jews—Italy and Denmark—differed fundamentally in terms of their religious make-up (the former being wholly Catholic and the latter wholly Protestant), but both were defined by small and highly assimilated Jewish populations.

cessionist theology so as to radically redefine its stance toward the Jewish religion.

The main problem with Goldhagen's demands of the present-day Church is that they fail to consider the considerable progress it has made in recent years toward improving Catholic-Jewish relations. Goldhagen concedes in the final section of his book that "everyone should recognize that there has been considerable goodwill toward Jews on the part of many people in the Church" since 1945 (p. 209). He acknowledges the landmark 1965 declaration at Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, by Pope John XXIII, which absolved Jews of the charge of deicide. He credits Pope John Paul II with visiting a Jewish synagogue in Rome (the first Pope ever to do so) and for issuing the pioneering documents of repentance, "We Remember," in 1998 and "Memory and Reconciliation" in 2000, in which the Papacy apologized for its passivity during the Holocaust. At every juncture, however, Goldhagen finds these gestures to be half-hearted half-measures that fall short of adequately responding to the past. It is perfectly reasonable for Goldhagen to subject these achievements to critical scrutiny. But in his zeal to judge, he fails to credit the Church for having come as far as it has in little more than a generation, especially for an institution that was allegedly irredeemably mired in eliminationist anti-Semitism. Goldhagen should recognize progress for what it is.

Goldhagen's reluctance to credit the Church for its postwar achievements is linked, finally, to his deeper failure to explain adequately a related question which is perhaps the most central of all—how was it actually possible for such an apparently anti-Semitic institution like the Catholic Church to change itself so radically during the course of the postwar period? Aside from describing Pope John XXIII as "a genuine friend of the Jews," Goldhagen does not try to account for the massive reform movement within the Church that brought about the Second Vatican council and *Nostra Aetate* (p. 204), nor for Pope John Paul II's obvious feelings of fraternity with the Jewish people, which he notes but does little to explain (p. 244). How two postwar Popes who were ostensibly reared in the same anti-Semitic Catholic culture and educational system could nevertheless be transformed into philo-Semites demands further explanation. But Goldhagen does little but make passing reference to the role of "the ecumenical spirit of our more pluralistic world" in affecting "the Church for the better" (p. 238).

In describing the Church's postwar turn away from anti-Semitism, Goldhagen interestingly enough runs into the same problem that he confronted in *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, where he had to account for the German people's postwar abandonment of their supposedly deeply in-

grained anti-Semitism. As is well known, Goldhagen attributed the Germans' postwar transformation to the Allied program of reeducation—a program that few scholars have ever credited as being so pivotal.¹⁶ The rapid turnabout of both the Germans and the Catholic Church after the war, from eliminationist anti-Semites to tolerant philo-Semites, raises all kinds of questions that Goldhagen never answers. Either Catholics (leaders and laity) were never so monolithically anti-Semitic in the first place, or the shock of the Nazi defeat brought about a pivotal transformation. Goldhagen merely alludes to the latter, claiming that “for Catholic . . . clergy and theologians, the Holocaust produced a crisis in theology which . . . led to substantial self-critical reflection and investigation, and then to . . . the important reforms of Vatican II and since then” (p. 256). But if this rather undeveloped observation is in fact true, it contradicts his characterization of the postwar Catholic Church as an institution that has accomplished precious little in attempting to atone for its past misdeeds. Goldhagen must explain how the impact of the Holocaust shook to its foundations an institution that was completely indifferent to it in the first place.

In the end, *A Moral Reckoning* is a powerful and passionate indictment of the Catholic Church, but it could go much further toward advancing the deeper cause of historical understanding. Many readers will no doubt be drawn to the book in an attempt to come to their own conclusions about the adequacy of the Catholic Church's postwar efforts to address its complicity in the Holocaust. After reading *A Moral Reckoning*, many will agree that the Church committed many wrongs in the past that require further repentance in the future. Few will take issue with Goldhagen's assertion that, for all of the Church's recent efforts to make amends, it still has far to go. In the end, however, far fewer will come away with an understanding of why the Church in the last generation has bothered to apologize at all.

16. Overall, most scholars have held that the United States succeeded most dramatically when it pulled back from active involvement in postwar German affairs and allowed the Germans to practice democratic self-rehabilitation themselves. See, for example, Edward N. Peterson, *The American Occupation of Germany: Retreat to Victory* (Detroit, 1977).