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The Roman Catholic Church, the Holocaust, and the demonization of the Jews:

Response to “Benjamin and us: Christianity, its Jews, and history” by Jeanne Favret-Saada

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Abstract

Following eleven years' work, in 1998 a high-level Vatican commission instituted by Pope John Paul II offered what has become the official position of the Roman Catholic Church denying any responsibility for fomenting the kind of demonization of the Jews that made the Holocaust possible. In a 2001 book, *The popes against the Jews*, I demonstrated that in fact the church played a major role in leading Catholics throughout Europe to view Jews as an existential threat. Yet defenders of the church position continue to deny the historical evidence and to launch ferocious ad hominem attacks against scholars who have researched the subject. The anti-Semitism promulgated by the church can be seen as part of the long battle it waged against modernity, with which the Jews were identified.

Keywords

anti-Semitism; Roman Catholic Church; Holocaust

The continuing effacement of the Roman Catholic Church's role in the demonization of Europe's Jews in the decades leading up to their mass murder has been a continuing campaign of the institutional church. It has been of particular importance to the church's right wing.¹ Of course, the Catholic Church is hardly alone in its attempts to deny its role in making the Holocaust possible. As someone who has spent many years living in Italy, I am struck by the extent to which Italians operate under the impression that they were allies of the United States and Britain and not Hitler in the Second World War.

I share with Favret-Saada the experience of having been so struck by the church's 1998 *apologia pro se*, “We remember,” that I was motivated to write a book presenting an account of the past that the long-awaited Vatican document had so artfully obfuscated. I was able to take advantage of the recent opening of the archives of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, along with the wealth of documents available in the Vatican Secret Archive, to trace the church's demonization of the Jews. The resulting book, *The popes against the*

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¹For whom the beatification of the wartime pope, Pius XII, has become a great battlecry. On this see also my 2014 book, *The Pope and Mussolini*.

Jews: The Vatican's role in the rise of modern anti-Semitism, published in 2001 used both those archival sources and the church's own publications for the period 1880–1940 to show the fallacy of the distinction made between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. As Favret-Saada notes, it is on this distinction that “We remember” bases its claim. It is unfortunately true that some Christians participated in a religiously grounded anti-Judaism, linking Jews to the death of Jesus, so the church's argument goes, but this had nothing to do with the quintessentially modern phenomenon that was anti-Semitism. The latter arose in the late nineteenth century, a product of modernity at a time when the church deemed modernity as its enemy. Modern anti-Semitism, in this view, contrasted with Christian anti-Judaism in that it was based not on religious arguments, but on social, political, and racial ones.

In fact, as Favret-Saada points out, while this is a comforting narrative for the church, it bears no relation to what actually happened in those fateful decades. From the very first months in which modern anti-Semitism took shape, the Roman Catholic Church was a major contributor, both directly and indirectly, to its development and its spread. Nor was it simply a matter of the more secular purveyors of anti-Semitism using the old church-linked images of Jews—Favret-Saada alludes to *the Nazis'* abundant use of ritual murder imagery, imagery employed just as prominently in the Italian Fascist regime's major anti-Semitic publication, *La difesa della razza*. The fact is that, in the wake of the granting of equal rights to Western Europe's Jews—a nineteenth-century development fiercely opposed by the Catholic Church—the church repeatedly tried to spread the alarm against a rapacious Jewish people bent on reducing all Christians to their slaves. Catholics were warned to beware of their Jewish neighbors, deemed members of a secret world conspiracy responsible not only for capitalism but also for communism.

Here Favret-Saada's remarks on modernity remind us of the complex link between modernity and anti-Semitism. In the official church view, it is the movements identified with modernity that produced the horrors of the Holocaust, movements long denounced by the church. And there is no denying that important nineteenth-century purveyors of modernity—most notably, socialism and nationalism—played significant roles in the demonization of the Jews. To this might be added twentieth-century racial “science.” But to neatly separate these forces from the role played by Christian churches (and here I look only at the Roman Catholic Church, but of course Protestant and other Christian churches played an important role) is to mistake ideology for history.

Let me just give one quick example from a source that Favret-Saada cites. As Mussolini's Fascists were marching on Rome in October 1922, *La Civiltà Cattolica* published a feature article titled “The world revolution and the Jews.” Keep in mind that the Jesuit journal was established by Pope Pius IX in 1850 to spread the pope's views on social and political issues to the Catholic world, that its editor is appointed by the pope, and that no article could be published before its text was reviewed and approved by the Vatican. The leaders of the Russian Revolution, the journal argued, were not “indigenous Russians” but rather “Jewish intruders.” Indeed, it claimed, of the five hundred or so leaders of the Bolshevik regime, “those of the Jewish race comprise a full 447.”² This argument, along with these bogus

²“La rivoluzione mondiale e gli ebrei,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* IV (1922): 111–21.

numbers, was directly taken up by the Nazis and comprised one of the central elements of the Nazi demonization of the Jews. One might ask just how all this fits into the church's official historical account. Indeed, as this brief quote illustrates, even that last refuge of distinguishing between an anti-Semitism based on race and an anti-Judaism based on religion is anachronistic. In these decades, there was no clear distinction between race, religion, nationality, and what would later come to be known as ethnicity.

I cannot resist adding an observation from Italy here. The imposition of Italy's racial laws in 1938 is often represented as the importation of a foreign, pagan, Nazi ideology that had no previous place in Italy. Yet a look at the draconian laws—evicting all Jewish children from school, dismissing all Jewish teachers and professors, civil servants, etc.—clearly shows they are little more (in fact less) than the restrictions imposed by the papal states on Rome's Jews up until their military defeat in 1870. And indeed *La Civiltà Cattolica* had been calling for exactly this kind of reimposition of restrictions on Italy's Jews in the years leading up to the racial laws. This is a history that neither the church, nor indeed Italians generally, are willing to face.

Favret-Saada's essay begins with something of a lament. One might understand why the institutional Roman Catholic Church would want to deny this past and to offer a more palatable, sanitized account of this history. But why is it that Jews and major Jewish institutions appear to be similarly invested in this narrative? Here I can offer something from personal experience. The New York City kick-off event for my book on this subject had been scheduled to take place at the Bronfman Center of NYU, NYU's Jewish student center. It was to be a round table with many distinguished scholars. A few days before the event, my publicist at Knopf called to tell me that the event had been canceled. The rabbi in charge, we were told, had decided that the event might offend Catholics. (Fortunately, Tony Judt offered to host the event a few blocks away at NYU's Remarque Institute and so it was in fact held.)

Indeed, those of us who have written on this history based on scholarly research in the archives and in other primary materials have been constantly vilified by those in the church eager to prop up the official Vatican narrative of this history. What is particularly relevant to Favret-Saada's account is the repeated use that the right wing of the Catholic Church makes of Jews in this effort. I view this as a modern manifestation of a medieval practice. Church authorities for centuries counted on Jewish converts, particularly those who could be dubbed former "rabbis," to establish the credibility of their accounts of how the Talmud commanded Jews to use the blood of Christian children to make their Passover matzah, or how the Talmud called on Jews to defraud Christians whenever possible. When a priest was needed to give the forced sermons to the Jews who were marched from Rome's ghetto into a neighboring church for the occasion, the preference was for a priest who had been raised as a Jew.

There is another element of this process that Favret-Saada mentions in passing, namely the supreme value that some Jews, and a number of major Jewish organizations, place on winning the support both of the institutional church and of Catholics more generally for the State of Israel. In this view, the past is the past. Jews have to be more concerned about the

present and the future, and the supreme good is support for the embattled State of Israel. If the church wants to claim it has always been a great friend of the Jews, so much the better.

Yet this too is but a modern manifestation of a longstanding medieval and early modern practice. I have often had the experience in both Vatican and Italian Jewish archives of reading pleas by Jewish communities to the pope. In these lands where the pope ruled over them, the Jews invariably adopted a supinely deferential tone. The pope was praised as a friend and protector of the Jews, a man whose goodness and charity knew no bounds. Only after such a profession of faith and gratitude would the Jewish petitioners make their request for help. Whether any of these Jews ever believed what they were saying might be debated, and it is possible that some could even have become convinced by their own rhetoric, and by a kind of wishful thinking. Perhaps the same is true today.

References

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2. Kertzer, David I. *The pope and Mussolini*. New York: Random House; 2014.

Biography

David I. Kertzer is the Paul Dupee University Professor of Social Science at Brown University, where he is also Professor of Anthropology and Italian Studies. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and from 2006 to 2011 served as provost of Brown University. Among his books dealing with politics and religion in Italy are *The kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara* (Knopf/Vintage), a finalist for the National Book Award in 1997; *The popes against the Jews* (Knopf/Vintage, 2001), which has been published in nine languages; and, most recently, *The pope and Mussolini* (Random House, 2014).