

*The Popes Against the Jews:  
The Vatican's Role in the Rise of  
Modern Anti-Semitism\**

Reviewed by Steven K. Baum\*\*

Rome has had a lot of apologizing and explaining to do lately. Added to the growing list of assaults, sex scandals, and indignities is the Catholic Church's long-standing love-hate relationship with the Jews. In a nation that bore the first Jewish ghettos,<sup>1</sup> made Jews wear identity badges, forbade them to develop relations with Christians in marriage, commerce, land ownership and living quarters, Vatican politics and policy and legendary denial should not come as any surprise.

Brown University Social Science professor David I. Kertzer should know. Author of *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*,<sup>2</sup> he examined the Bologna Church's 1858 kidnapping of a Jewish child (Mortara) and the forced baptism, Catholic press propaganda, and Church denial during a Catholic conversion. In *The Popes Against the Jews* he focuses on the larger issues of the Vatican's involvement in the Dreyfus Affair, the Catholic press, transmission of hate mythologies, for example, blood libel (Jews allegedly kidnapping Christian children to eat during Passover), as well as papal politics from 1740 and 1940. Kertzer links theory with results and asks: After hundreds of years of anti-Semitism, why question Pope Pius XII's indifference to the thousand Roman Jews en route to Auschwitz?

This is not yet another indictment of anti-Semitic popes. Kertzer speaks to Church intolerance, stonewalling, and cover-up. A recent event is telling. Pope John Paul II called for an inquiry into Church culpability during the Jewish genocide. The panel was finally convened in 1999 by the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and the International Jewish Committee on Inter-religious Consultations. Professors Robert Wistrich (Hebrew University, Jerusalem), Michael Marrus (University of Toronto), and Bernard Sucheky (University of Brussels), plus three Catholic researchers, released a report asking 47 "significant" questions regarding the policies and actions of Pope Pius. As this was more than the Vatican wanted the world to know, church officials immediately called off the probe.

Change is slow in the Catholic Church. As of 1965, the Jews were no longer guilty of having killed Christ;<sup>3</sup> Galileo was forgiven by 1981. The Church did go to great lengths to separate religious anti-Semitism from its nine-

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teenth-century racist cousin. (The latter Darwinian version is thought to have given rise to the Jewish genocide of the Second World War.) The argument is a spurious one, however, since both ideologies have proven to be quite effective. One would have to ask the victims of the Inquisition and Crusades if they could tell the difference.

Kertzer rightly acknowledges that the Roman Catholic Church is hardly alone to blame for enmity toward Jews (One cannot find more anti-Semitic statements than from prominent Protestant theologians such as Martin Luther). Individual acts of bravery in saving Jews and "hidden children" are well documented and lauded.

There are other, more trenchant examinations on the subject currently available, Daniel J. Goldhagen's *A Moral Reckoning*<sup>4</sup> prominent among them. But Kertzer offers a brief and concise explanation of what was and what could have been. What Kertzer makes clear is that alleged Catholic Church indifference to the Jewish genocide is not an act of omission, but occurs by quiet collusion and the politics of hate.

#### NOTES

1. Venice, 1516.
2. Vintage, 1999.
3. Vatican II.
4. Knopf, 2002.