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Jesus, Jews, and the Shoah

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A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair, by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen (Knopf, 352 pp., \$25)

I began this book as an admirer of its author. Goldhagen's 1996 work, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, forcefully rejected the leftist paradigms that had come to dominate study of the worst event in human history. Where other historians posited exculpatory social structures, collectivities, or "irresistible forces," Goldhagen presented Germans as individual moral agents, as thinking and choosing beings. From this first effort, it was clear that Goldhagen had one of those rare minds that, across labyrinths of sophistry, and through mazes of irrelevant facts, could cut right to the point.

In one area, it is true, that earlier work was marred by some dubious speculation. "European anti-Semitism," Goldhagen wrote, was "a corollary of Christianity": Because Jews rejected the revelation of Jesus, they challenged Christians' certitude in that revelation. Doctrinal Christianity was shaped by that early challenge and, over the centuries, warped by it. Such a thesis, even if true, would be difficult to prove; but to his credit, Goldhagen sharply differentiated Christian from Nazi attitudes. The Volkisch worldview, he stressed, "contradicted and did not admit the Christian one that had held sway for centuries." That firm and clear distinction -- and the book's overwhelming focus on German secular racism -- ensured that *Hitler's Willing Executioners* was far from a bigoted attack on Christianity per se.

In the afterword to the paperback edition of that book, however, signs of a "Goldhagen Problem" emerged. In the U.S. he was attacked by venerable Holocaust scholars, whose works he had eviscerated; but in a tour of Germany, where the book became a bestseller, Goldhagen was hailed as the scholarly equivalent of a rock star. His self-celebratory account of that "huge success"; his gloating reminders of the "frequent and vigorous" applause bestowed by "large audiences"; his inability to refrain from noting that German newspapers hailed his visit as a Triumphzug (triumphal procession) -- these would have been turned, by any writer with a modicum of self-consciousness, to the purpose of some humbling and endearing ethos. But in the afterword to *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, that shoe never dropped; and in *A Moral Reckoning* that same self-righteousness, now cancerously advanced, ruins what should have been a sober and important work, in a field where one is greatly needed.

A Moral Reckoning is, among its other faults, a 352-page exercise in intellectual bad manners. Reading it is like listening for three days to Nikita Khrushchev banging his shoe. Goldhagen's sour, jut-lipped attitude is apparent even in the introduction, where -- in a single two-page stretch -- he preemptively deems his critics "philosophically bizarre," "strange," "odd," and "silly" (this last word he uses repeatedly). His own views, of course, are "obvious," "overwhelming," or, most typically, "facts."

That Goldhagen should have written this book with attitude need not have been fatal. Many good writers, from Montaigne to Mencken, have been impolitic, colicky, or sassy. But Goldhagen's smug and disrespectful stance does not inspire confidence that he will turn each issue carefully, catching all sides of it in reason's light. That he should attempt to do so is vital; for, as he himself allows, "some of the evidence can be read in multiple ways."

The book begins with an attack on the World War II-era Pope, Pius XII, originally written for *The New Republic* under the taunting title, "What Would Jesus Have Done?" Goldhagen does not actually answer that question, but he does imply that a wartime Jesus would have done more than Pius, who "was serving . . . the closest human analogue to the Antichrist, Hitler," and who "tacitly and sometimes materially aided in mass murder." As other critics do, Goldhagen alleges that Pius was silent on the fate of the Jews. During the Holocaust, Pius "chose again and again not to mention the Jews publicly. . . . [In] public statements by Pius XII . . . any mention of the Jews is conspicuously absent."

In fact, Pius used the word "Jew" in his very first encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus*. There he insisted that all human beings be treated charitably -- for, as Paul had written to the Colossians, in God's eyes "there is neither Gentile nor Jew." In saying this, the Pope affirmed that Jews were full members of the human community -- which, in Hitler's *Willing Executioners*, had been Goldhagen's own criterion for establishing "dissent from the anti-Semitic creed" [emphasis added].

That Goldhagen gets Pius wrong is perhaps due to his near-total reliance, in the treatment of the wartime period, on secondary sources hostile to the Catholic Church. The biased and arguable interpretations in these works are gulped down whole. Since an exhaustive listing of Goldhagen's derived misreadings has already been published by Ronald J. Rychlak (in *First Things*, June/July 2002), it seems best to draw over this unfortunate section the curtain of oblivion. More interesting by far is Goldhagen's implication that it was Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospels, who made the Holocaust possible.

It would be futile, of course, to deny that the Nazis built a vast mass of evil on a vast mass of prejudice. It would be equally futile to deny that strong prejudices against the Jews existed among Christians during the centuries before the Shoah. Since, moreover, the childhood of the European nations was passed under the tutelage of the clergy, we should not be surprised that these prejudices were, in part, ecclesiastically inculcated.

That this general anti-Judaism contributed to a moral climate in which Europeans became willing executioners of Jews has been argued by some, beginning with Jules Isaac in 1948. But, in the main, these critics stopped short of blaming Christianity for the Holocaust. The great exception is Hyam Maccoby, who in the 1980s posited that the Jesus of the Gospels was anti-Semitic. Goldhagen takes up Maccoby's view. In *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, as noted, Goldhagen distinguished between the Nazis' "eliminationist anti-Semitism" and Christian anti-Judaism. But in *A Moral Reckoning* that distinction is obliterated by a hurricane of ostensibly contrary proof.

"You brood of vipers . . . you are evil . . ." So said Jesus, Goldhagen reminds us, to "the Jews who were Pharisees." One could, of course, just say "the Pharisees," without reminding us they were Jewish; but then, the passage wouldn't seem anti-Semitic. This sleight-of-hand continues in the next sentence, where Goldhagen sneaks from "the Jews who were Pharisees" to Jesus' alleged indictment of "such a people," i.e., the Jews. Farther down the page, after quoting more criticisms of the Pharisees, Goldhagen mischaracterizes those words, too, as an "account of the Jews." At the tail end of this disastrous passage, he even inserts the word "Jews" in brackets where the text just says "you," meaning the Pharisees. He also puts in brackets "Jewish," where Matthew says merely "the whole people [laos]" -- which could mean the Jews, but could also mean the general Judean populace, including its many pagan Greeks and Romans. (These passages are often requoted as proof of anti-Semitism, with the bracketed insertions of Jewishness always stuck to them like pilotfish.) The paragraph closes with a false reassertion that Jesus "decrees Jews to be a 'brood of vipers'" when in fact -- as Goldhagen himself said at the paragraph's outset -- Jesus was merely addressing "the Jews who were Pharisees."

Having thus manufactured evidence of anti-Semitism -- having set up this straw Jesus -- Goldhagen wheels round his guns. Christ's denunciations of the Pharisees -- misrepresented as "speeches from Jesus deprecating the unbelieving Jews" -- are "the Christian Bible's libels." They thus constitute the major premise in Goldhagen's high argument: that Christianity is inherently anti-Semitic.

The anti-Semitism of the Christian Bible is not incidental to it but constitutive of its story of Jesus' life and death and of its messages about God and humanity. . . . Christianity has consecrated a heinous set of charges against Jews in its foundational text. . . . The Christian Bible is . . . a profoundly anti-Semitic text. . . . Christianity is a religion that consecrated at its core and, historically, spread throughout its domain a megatherian hatred of one group of people: the Jews. . . . The cumulative damage of the Christian Bible's defamatory account of Jews to their image and reputation among its credulous readers would be hard to exaggerate.

Goldhagen exaggerates it. He argues that Catholic "demonology of Jews" was "compatible with or implied eliminationist solutions, including perhaps extermination." But in fact, Pope Calixtus II's 1120 bull *Sicut Judaeis* specifically forbade the harming of Jews. Goldhagen fails to mention this.

From what he calls his "measured and nuanced account of [Catholic] culpability for various aspects of the Holocaust," Goldhagen deduces proposals for restitution. The Church must not merely pay Jews money, and must not only "support, protect, and sustain" Israel, but must also change its doctrine. Specifically, the Church must cease to be Catholic: It must disavow its universalist claims and instead affirm that "The Jews' way to God is as legitimate as the Christian way." The Pope should convene a Third Vatican Council, as proposed by the liberal former priest, James Carroll, at which "Jews would have a full voice." At this congress it might be agreed, as Carroll urges, that "the Church not treat the Christian Bible as a divine and sacred text" and that "the anti-Semitism of the Christian Bible be excised." Granting, however, that the Church is unlikely to do any of these things, Goldhagen proposes a prophylactic dose of political-religious correctness:

[The Church] could include in every Christian Bible a detailed, corrective account alongside the text about its many anti-Semitic passages, and a clear disclaimer explaining that even though these passages were once presented as fact, they are actually false or dubious and have been the source of much unjust injury. They could include essays on the various failings of the Christian Bible, and a detailed running commentary on each page that would correct the texts' erroneous and libelous assertions.

Goldhagen does not say it, but one has the sense that he would affix, to every Christian Bible, the warning label: "This text contains hate speech."

It is a shame that someone who wrote such a good book in 1996 should have allowed himself to become a rank pamphleteer. Among the many sad results of his fixation on Catholicism is that Goldhagen overlooks a more compelling interpretation of the Shoah -- one that he, as a "big picture" historian, might otherwise have been well equipped to probe. As Lucy Dawidowicz saw in 1946, the Holocaust was the product not of Christendom, but of Christendom's collapse. The destruction of Christendom effected (1) the rejection of Catholic natural law and (2) the rise of the absolute nation-state, previously impossible because popes could depose and counterbalance kings. Hitler, to be sure, contributed a neo-paganism and anti-Semitism all his own. But in mobilizing opinion and wielding power, he was helped more by these two innovations than by any Catholic doctrines.

Goldhagen does not turn the issue in the light to catch this edge of it. Instead, he mounts his hobbyhorse for a spree of intellectual wilding. Mindful that he must not seem a bigot, he sprinkles, at intervals, some deferential disclaimers: "The Catholic Church and its moral creed . . . [are], at [their] core, good and admirable." But as we ride with him, these caveats become increasingly desultory and rhetorical; and by the work's end, he finds that "the Catholic Church . . . by its actions has forfeited its claims to deference." For indeed, if what Goldhagen writes about the Church is true, then the Church is at its core not good, but evil. And that Goldhagen in fact believes Christianity, as such, is bad for Jews -- even deadly to them -- is suggested by the weight and odor of abuse he heaps upon it.

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