

# Pius XII, the Holy See, and the Jews

*By Charlotte Canizo*

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**The Vatican's attitude during the Holocaust and the persecution of the Jews has been at the heart of numerous debates and controversies. N. Valbousquet analyses the ambivalent position of the papacy during the pontificate of Pius XII and provides a sensitive history through the archives.**

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Reviewed: Nina Valbousquet, *Les Âmes tièdes. Le Vatican face à la Shoah*, Paris, La Découverte, 2024, 480 p., 26€.

In 2019, Pope Francis announced the opening (effective as of 2020) of the archives of the pontificate of Pius XII (1939-1958). This event, typically circumscribed to scholarly circles, made headlines in the press, which impatiently awaited revelations about the Holy See's attitude towards Jewish persecution and the Holocaust. In total, sixteen million documents have been made public, shedding new light on the Vatican's stance during the genocide.

While the German playwright Rolf Hochhuth denounced Pius XII's failure to explicitly condemn the Nazi crimes against the Jews as early as 1963 in his play *The Deputy, a Christian tragedy* – a criticism extended by the film-director Costa-Gavras in his 2002 film adaptation of the previous play, *Amen* – archival research remains essential for a deeper and more comprehensive analysis of this issue. Historian Nina Valbousquet, a specialist of the history of fascism, humanitarianism, Catholicism, antisemitism, and the Holocaust, was granted access to the archives of Pius XII in 2020. Four years later, she presents the findings of her research, in her book *Les Âmes tièdes*.

*Le Vatican face à la Shoah*. In the title, she borrows the expression used by writer Albert Camus to criticise Pope Pius XII (Eugenio Pacelli) for his lack of clear stance during the conflict in the issue of December 26, 1944, of the French Resistance journal *Combat*: “Our world does not need lukewarm souls (*âmes tièdes*). It needs burning hearts.”<sup>1</sup> Valbousquet chose this expression not “to pass retrospective judgment on the actors of this period” but because “it offers a striking summary of the tensions inherent to this topic since the war” (p. 8).<sup>2</sup>

These questionings regarding the papacy’s positions, statements, and silences during the Holocaust are the central themes of the book. The aim is also to shift the focus away from the figure of the Pope by looking at the other actors who make up the Curia. Why, in fact, did the main actors put so much emphasis, from the Second World War onwards, on the Pope’s statements and stance? “What does the power of the papacy actually represent, so that it is expected to take a stand and exert a decisive influence?” (p. 8).<sup>3</sup> Divided into three parts, the book examines the ambivalence of the papacy’s actions and statements in the face of antisemitic persecutions and seeks to understand the reasons why these ambivalences persisted during and after the conflict.

## Explaining Silence

By placing the relations between the Vatican and the Jews in a long-term perspective, the historian demonstrates that the Holy See’s attitude towards the genocide is partly rooted in Christian anti-Judaism. In particular, the accusation of deicide – the idea that the Jews as a people are responsible for the killing of God – provided a theological justification for antisemitic persecutions or at least explained “a certain indifference and fatalism regarding the suffering of the Jewish people” (p. 24).<sup>4</sup> Other factors also played a key role: the association between the Jews and modernity (perceived as anti-Christian), the ecclesiocentrism – that is, the prioritisation of “the Church’s interests and the restoration of a Christian society” (p.

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1 Original in French: « Notre monde n’a pas besoin d’âmes tièdes. Il a besoin de cœurs brûlants ».

2 « pour porter un jugement rétrospectif sur les acteurs de cette période », mais parce qu’« elle offre un condensé saisissant des tensions animant ce sujet dès la guerre ».

3 « Que représente au fond le pouvoir pontifical pour que l’on attende de lui qu’il prenne position et que la voix du pape exerce une influence décisive ? ».

4 « Une certaine indifférence et un fatalisme face aux souffrances du peuple juif ».

31) – as well as the Vatican’s diplomatic caution.<sup>5</sup> Additional myths borrowed from modern antisemitism, such as the association between the Jews and the Communists (“Judeo-Bolshevism”) as the Church was particularly anti-communist at that time, and Catholic opposition to Zionism, also contribute to explain the Vatican’s lack of explicit condemnation of antisemitism.

Between 1938 and 1941, the Holy See prioritised assistance to “non-Aryan Catholics,” – that is, baptised Jews –, Catholics of “Jewish origin,” and individuals in mixed marriages. The decision to support these groups in priority was motivated not only by their ties to Catholicism, but also by the Vatican’s willingness to defend the Church’s prerogatives. Indeed, Fascist and Nazi laws did not recognise the “effect of baptism and conversion” (p. 52) and had a different definition of mixed marriage.<sup>6</sup> These laws considered a marriage as mixed (and therefore prohibited it), if one spouse was a convert of Jewish origin, whereas the Vatican did not classify such a case to be a mixed marriage. Through these laws, the two totalitarian regimes redefined sacraments (baptism, marriage) that were at the heart of the Church’s prerogatives, something that the Holy See disapproved.

The aim was then to protect these categories of population to defend the authority of the Church when it comes to religious sacraments. Most notably, the Vatican tried to help some people and their families to flee abroad, particularly to the Americas. For instance, in 1939, Brazil granted the Vatican three thousand visas to welcome “non-Aryan Catholics” refugees. Although the Holy See attempted to help people fleeing persecution by granting these visas, Nina Valbousquet highlights the failure of the “Brazilian action” (p. 79) due to the insurmountable barriers faced by the refugees and the strict criteria imposed by the Brazilian authorities. Therefore, even when the Vatican was willing to help, the obstacles were sometimes too important to overcome.

## **The Vatican’s ambivalence during the Holocaust**

Focusing on the Holy See’s response at the peak of the Holocaust from 1941 to 1944, Nina Valbousquet shows that Pius XII, through extensive correspondence, was kept “continually informed of the persecution of the Jews from the beginning of the

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5 « intérêts de l’Église et à la restauration d’une société chrétienne ».

6 « L’effet du baptême et de la conversion ».

war and its climax during the Holocaust” (p. 171).<sup>7</sup> Despite this information, the Holy See did not issue any public condemnation of Nazi atrocities during the war, primarily using “the Vatican's principles of neutrality and impartiality” as a justification (p. 116).<sup>8</sup> Even when the Pope spoke publicly and alluded to the ongoing genocide, it was “more a matter of deploring than condemning” (p. 206).<sup>9</sup>

However, this cautious approach in public did not prevent the Holy See from helping the victims of the war, by providing humanitarian aid that was supposed to be universal. While the bulk of this aid was still primarily directed towards “non-Aryan Catholics,” Catholics of “Jewish origin,” and individuals in mixed marriages, the Vatican occasionally extended its help to non-converted Jews and their families. The author shows that this was particularly the case during tragedies, such as the shipwrecks of Jewish refugees in the Mediterranean. In such instances, the Holy See endeavoured to gather information about possible survivors and to relay it to their relatives.

Sometimes, the Vatican sought to influence policies towards the Jews in predominantly Catholic countries such as Slovakia, though with no significant impact. It was only during the final phase of the conflict, with the confirmation that an Allied victory was imminent, and to avoid “accusations of passivity and inaction”<sup>10</sup> (p. 279) that the Vatican carried out “more pronounced interventions in Axis countries where Jews were still being persecuted” (p. 261).<sup>11</sup> At the end of the war, the Vatican tried to justify its position during the conflict by using the argument of silence as the “lesser evil,” arguing that the Nazi reprisals that the Jewish victims and the Church could have faced in the event of explicit condemnation could have worsened the situation.

## **A slow and difficult awakening in the postwar period**

Finally, the Holy See struggled to acknowledge the significance of the Holocaust in the postwar period and until the 1950s. The Vatican still avoided to condemn antisemitism explicitly, even amid ongoing outbreaks of violence towards

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7 « continuellement informé de la persécution des Juifs dès le début de la guerre et de son paroxysme dans la Shoah ».

8 Les « principes de neutralité et d'impartialité du Vatican ».

9 « plus de déplorer que de condamner ».

10 Les « accusations de passivité et d'inaction ».

11 Des « interventions plus marquées dans les pays de l'Axe où les Juifs sont encore persécutés ».

the Jews, such as the Kielce pogrom in Poland on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1946, during which 42 Jewish people were murdered. Christian anti-Judaism also persisted, alongside narratives from some Catholic writers, such as Daniel-Rops, suggesting that the genocide of the Jews was a kind of “providential justice hidden behind the antisemitic persecutions, as a continuation of the punishment for the ‘deicide’” (p. 331), an idea which was shared by a part of the Curia.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the persistence of antisemitic ideas, the onset of the Cold War and the creation of the State of Israel – at a time when the Vatican was opposed to Zionism – also partly explain the Holy See’s ambivalence in the post-war period. However, the Vatican adopted a much less hesitant attitude regarding the trials for crimes committed by former Nazis (as well as Italian fascists), issuing numerous “appeals to Christian clemency for Nazi perpetrators” (p. 311).<sup>13</sup> This apparent lack of awareness of the crimes committed by the Nazis, along with the absence of an explicit condemnation of antisemitism, shocked to the point that some contemporaries questioned the Vatican on its lack of a clear stance. Thanks to access to new sources, the historian concludes that it is “now undeniable that the Vatican deliberately remained silent, reluctant to explicitly and unequivocally denounce the genocide of the Jews during the war, but also after 1945” (p. 360).<sup>14</sup>

## A Sensitive History of the Holocaust

Nina Valbousquet’s remarkable work provides insights into the complexities of the Vatican’s decision-making process. *Les âmes tièdes* fills in an important historiographical gap and contextualises the debates surrounding the Vatican’s stance during the Holocaust within a long-term perspective to better understand its origins.

Throughout the book, the historian takes the readers into the archives, immersing them in the atmosphere of the Holy See through numerous excerpts from correspondence and other documents. The meticulous analytical methodology used highlights the details of each document – erasures, edits, and annotations in the

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12 Une sorte de « justice providentielle qui serait cachée derrière les persécutions antisémites, comme continuation du châtimeut pour le “déicide” ».

13 Les « appels à la clémence chrétienne pour les bourreaux nazis ».

14 Il est « désormais indéniable que le Vatican a délibérément gardé le silence, réticent à dénoncer le génocide des Juifs de manière explicite et univoque, durant la guerre, mais aussi après 1945 ».

margins – that “reflect the hesitations, dilemmas, and biases of the Vatican administration” (p. 17).<sup>15</sup>

Seeking to avoid writing solely a diplomatic and administrative history of the Holy See’s attitude during the genocide, Nina Valbousquet also aimed “to recover the voices of the victims themselves” (p. 364),<sup>16</sup> as well as those of their relatives, within the dense correspondence between the Vatican and the persecuted. As she writes: “Beyond the somewhat disembodied diplomatic and administrative history, the Pius XII archives also contain, for those who bother to look into, fragments of lives cut short by persecution” (p. 364).<sup>17</sup> These were the cases of separated mixed families, relatives of Jewish refugees who died in shipwrecks, and individuals writing to the Vatican in an attempt to obtain a visa. Adopting a micro-historical approach, the historian offers a sensitive history of the Holocaust that gives a better picture of the situations faced by those who turned to the Vatican for help. Reading the correspondence also helps to humanise members of the Curia, who sometimes seem to have genuinely done their best to help the persecuted, despite significant difficulties.

By combining administrative insights with personal narratives, *Les Âmes tièdes* brings the readers closer to the victims while analysing the mechanisms of the Vatican administration. This dual perspective enables us to understand the ambivalent behaviour of the Holy See during this period, a topic that has been at the heart of numerous controversies for decades.

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15 « traduisent les hésitations, dilemmes et biais de l’administrative vaticane ».

16 « Retrouver les voix des victimes elles-mêmes ».

17 « Au-delà de l’histoire diplomatique et administrative quelque peu désincarnée, les archives Pie XII contiennent aussi, pour peu qu’on se donne la peine de les chercher, des bribes de vies fauchées par la persécution ».