
L'affaire Williamson: The Church and Holocaust Denial

by E. Michael Jones

On Wednesday, January 21, 2009, in the middle of the week which the Church has traditionally used to promote Christian unity, Pope Benedict XVI signed a letter announcing that he intended to lift the excommunications imposed on the bishops in charge of the Society of St. Pius X, taking a major step toward ending the almost 21-year old schism that began on June 30, 1988 when Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, along with Bishop Antonio Castro de Mayer, illicitly consecrated Bernard Fellay, Bernard Tissier de Mallerais, Alfonso de Galaretta, and Richard Williamson in a ceremony at the SSPX seminary in Ecône, Switzerland. On July 1, 1988, one day after the illicit consecrations, Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, the then head of the Congregation of Bishops in Rome, announced that all six men had incurred excommunication *latae sententiae*, the penalty laid down in the revised Code of Canon Law, Canon 1382, for directly participating in an episcopal consecration in the absence of a papal mandate.

According to the January 21, 2009 document, Bishop Fellay, the Superior General of the Society had written in December to Cardinal Dario Castrillon-Hoyos, Prefect of the Ecclesia Dei commission, requesting the removal of the excommunications. Fellay claimed that, "We are always firmly determined in our will to remain Catholic and to place all our efforts at the service of the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ, which is the Roman Catholic Church. We accept its teachings with filial animus. We believe firmly in the Primacy of Peter and its prerogatives, and for this the current situation makes us suffer so much."

Pope Benedict decided to lift the excommunications in order to promote unity in the Church: "This gift of peace at the end of the Christmas celebrations, is also intended to be a sign to promote unity in the charity of the universal Church and to try to vanquish the scandal of division." ("With peace like this," we can imagine the pope muttering to himself a few days later, "who needs war?")

Serious efforts to end the Lefebvre schism began in April 2005, when Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger became pope. Cardinal Ratzinger had always been sympathetic to widespread use of the old Mass, a cause dear to traditionalists. Two years into his pontificate Benedict lifted all remaining restrictions on the celebration of the *Vetus Ordo*, when he issued the *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* on July 7, 2007.

Bishop Fellay met with Pope Benedict at Castel Gandolfo on August 29, 2005, only four months after Benedict's election, and from that moment discussions started in earnest for the removal of the excommunications. On June 4, 2008, Cardinal Castrillon-Hoyos set several conditions to be met by the SSPX to facilitate a lifting of the excommunications. All of them had to do with schism, which is based on lack of charity; none of them had anything remotely to do with the Holocaust.

In November 2008 Bishop Fellay led a pilgrimage to Lourdes, during which he asked the faithful to pray the rosary to have the excommunications lifted. On January 21, 2009 his prayers were answered when he received the letter from Giovanni Battista Re remitting the excommunications. Re mentioned in his letter that the gesture was intended “to be a sign to promote unity in the charity of the universal Church and to try to end the scandal of division.” Re also mentioned the hope that this gesture would “be followed by the prompt accomplishment of full communion with the Church of the entire Society of St. Pius X, thus testifying true fidelity and true recognition of the Magisterium and of the authority of the Pope with the proof of visible unity.”

Bishop Fellay responded by expressing his “filial gratitude to the Holy Father for this gesture,” which he hoped would help “to remedy the unprecedented crisis which presently shakes the Catholic world, and which Pope John Paul II had designated as a state of ‘silent apostasy.’” The message of the pope’s gesture was clear to Fellay: “Tradition will no longer be stigmatized.”

“Thanks to this gesture,” Fellay continued, “Catholics attached to Tradition throughout the world will no longer be unjustly stigmatized and condemned for having kept the Faith of their fathers. Catholic tradition is no longer excommunicated. Though it never was in itself, it was often excommunicated and cruelly so in day to day events.” In his response, Fellay stressed his and the SSPX’s loyalty, as well as a willingness to work toward resolving:

the unprecedented crisis which is shaking the Church today: crisis of vocations, crisis of religious practice, of catechism, of the reception of the sacraments . . . Before us Paul VI went so far as to say that “from some fissure the smoke of Satan had entered the Church,” and he spoke of the “self-destruction of the Church.” John Paul II did not hesitate to say that Catholicism in Europe was, as it were, in a state of “silent apostasy.” Shortly before his election to the Throne of Peter, B XVI compared the Church to a “boat taking water on every side.” We are ready to write the Creed with our own blood, to sign the anti-modernist oath, the profession of faith of Pius IV, we accept and make our own all the councils up to the Second Vatican Council about which we express some reservations.

Some pundits, however, felt there was a contradiction between the two assertions, i.e., between professions of loyalty and recognition that an “unprecedented crisis is shaking the Church today.” Neoconservative George Weigel was one of those pundits. Weigel took issue with Fellay’s reservations about Vatican II, claiming that “Responsible canon lawyers have raised questions about whether this arrogance [reservations about Vatican II] on the part of Bishop Fellay does not cast in question his fulfillment of the canonical requirements for a lawful lifting of his excommunication.” (George Weigel, Newsweek, “[Rome’s Reconciliation: Did the pope heal or deepen the Lefebvre schism?](#)”)

Weigel puts in words a spectre which would go on to haunt the entire discussion surrounding the lifting of the excommunications, namely, the fact that in some circles of the Church the profession of faith had been replaced by a profession of faith in Vatican II. Vatican II was not just one council among many, according to this view. At some point during the past 50 years it had become a shibboleth and the sine qua non of church membership. Once it had been proposed as the substitute for the Creed, Vatican II then got reduced to the documents which were supposed to support the political agenda of the person doing the reducing. In the case of American neocons like Weigel, the Catholic Faith, became by way of synecdoche, Vatican II statements on the Jews and religious liberty. If Bishop

Fellay expressed reservations about Vatican II, this was an indication in Weigel's mind "that the healing has not taken place. . . . Moreover, Fellay's letter raises the stakes for everyone, and to the highest level. For what is at issue now, is the integrity of the Church's self-understanding, which must include the authenticity of the teaching of Vatican II." Weigel found it difficult "to see how the unity of the Catholic Church will be advanced if the Lefebvrist faction does not publicly and unambiguously affirm Vatican Council II's teaching on the nature of the church, on religious freedom, and on the sin of anti-Semitism."

"How," Weigel wondered in a [comment](#) to *The Washington Post*, "does this advance the unity of the church if they are reconciled [without embracing church positions on religious freedom and anti-Semitism?] This really has the possibility of unraveling a lot of the accomplishments of the John Paul and Benedict periods if not handled well." All of the themes were introduced in the overture of this opera, which would revolve around but not resolve the related issues of tradition and anti-Semitism. Was anti-Semitism part of the Catholic DNA? Did Vatican II trump the Gospel of St. John? Or did it have to be read in the light of the Gospels?

On Thursday, January 22, within minutes of the leaking on the internet of the announcement that the excommunications of the four bishops were to be lifted, reports that Bishop Williamson was a "Holocaust denier" began circulating on the web as well. These reports referred to an interview conducted months before in Germany but to be broadcast the following day on Swedish TV.

In his interview, Williamson did not deny the suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazi regime, but he did question the details of the Holocaust narrative, concerning the numbers of people who died at Auschwitz and how they died. In doing this he broke the law in Germany and earned himself the epithet "Holocaust denier."

"Pope Rehabilitates Holocaust Denier" is the [headline](#) Reuters used to frame the issue. Once the issue got framed that way, the intent of the story became clear. *L'affaire Williamson* was born as a combination of the Danish cartoon story and the media-orchestrated uproar among Muslims over the pope's Regensburg speech. The "Pope Rehabilitates Holocaust Denier" incident was a replay of the media-inspired frenzy, which took place in the wake of the pope's September 2006 Regensburg speech, over the pope's quote from Emperor Manuel Paleologos . Once the term "Holocaust denier" got broached, the story took on a life of its own, and that life had nothing to do with the pope's intention, namely, to heal a schism and promote unity. In fact, before long it became clear that the point of this story was to prevent the schism from being healed by proposing a counter-morality based on a counter-magisterium based on the dogmas of political correctness.

In spite of the Vatican's efforts to the contrary, news reports kept confusing the church's focus on the sin of schism with the media world's focus on the unforgivable secular sin, i.e., "Holocaust denial" and anti-Semitism. The media could be forgiven for their ignorance in light of the fact that theologians were failing to make the appropriate distinctions too. Wolfgang Beinert, a student of the pope who now occupies the same chair the pope held at the University of Regensburg, faulted his former mentor for breaking what he termed a 2000-year old tradition in the Church. Up until a week ago, Ratzinger's successor at Regensburg opined, "Groups which stood in contradiction to the pope had to recant their positions before they were readmitted to the church." Beinert here seems to be referring to the "sin" of Holocaust denial rather than the sin of schism because, he "doubts that Rome was unaware of Williamson's views." Beinert was evidently unaware that the bishops had signed a statement repudiating schism. Either that, or he considered holocaust denial a greater sin. If Catholics were confused it was understandable. Evidently even theologians were having a hard time keeping their sins straight.

The Swedish TV interview had been in the can for months but it got released within minutes of the announcement that the pope intended to lift the excommunications. Sources close to the SSPX in Sweden had been warning them during the fall of 2008 that they were being set up by the TV journalist Ali Fegan and the people associated with the Swedish National TV show “*Uppdrag granskning*” (“Mission Examination”). The SSPX’s Father Morgan, however, continued cooperating evidently feeling that Swedish National Television was interested in filming the ordination of the Swedish SSPX seminarian Sten Sandmarks at the SSPX seminary in Zaitzkofen, Bavaria, which is where Bishop Williamson was interviewed on November 1, 2008 when he made his comments about how many people died in Auschwitz. Evidence that Williamson trusted the Swedish film crew is evident on the film itself when Williamson says, naively, “You realize you can get me in prison for that. I hope that is not your intention.”

Once Fegan and the “*Uppdrag granskning*” crew had Williamson’s interview in the can they traveled around Sweden showing it to the various groups which rented their facilities to the SSPX claiming that if they continued to rent their facilities to the SSPX they would be indicted as Holocaust deniers as well. The Anglican Church in Stockholm succumbed to these pressures and canceled their contract with the SSPX.

Not content to leave it at that, the “*Uppdrag granskning*” crew then showed the Williamson film clip to other SSPX clergymen, putting them in the unenviable situation of either denouncing Bishop Williamson in public or incriminating themselves in the crime of “Holocaust denial.” According to the same source which tried to warn the SSPX in the fall of 2008, holocaust denial is “here in Sweden the worst sin and crime you can possibly commit, according to the gramscian-leftist Jewish-owned Swedish media establishment.” The word of the set up had gone out through the SSPX by late November or early December. We know this because the same source wrote that “I hope and pray that this TV-program will not be broadcasted [*sic*] before Christmas-then we would have some time to prepare ourselves [*sic*] for this fight.”

Italian journalists writing for *Il Reformista* and *Il Giornale* were claiming that the Williamson affair was the result of a conspiracy between Ali Fegan and the Swedish national TV network and the French journalist and Lesbian activist Fiametta Venner who had written a book, *Les Nouveaux Soldats du pape*, attacking the SSPX in France and an unnamed official in the Vatican, with good contacts in Scandanavia, who wanted to thwart the re-union. The bishop of Sweden, Anders Arborelius, OCD, was no friend of the SSPX in Sweden and clearly upset by the SSPX’s campaign to reconvert Sweden back to the Catholic faith. Arborelius spoke of inclusivity as the chief characteristic of Catholicism, something clearly at odds with racism and intolerance, which he seemed to imply was motivating the SSPX in its attempts to convert the Swedes. By the end of the first week of the controversy, Vatican Spokesman Federico Lombardi was one of the few people who still claimed that the timing of the reversal of Williamson’s excommunication and the Swedish broadcast were “absolutely unrelated.”

The folks at “*Uppdrag granskning*,” however, had bigger fish to fry than disrupting the SSPX’s Christmas holiday or defending Swedes from proselytism. The fact that the interview showed up on the internet within minutes of the announcement lifting the excommunications showed that the timing was intended to disrupt the healing of the Lefebvre schism, something that became obvious when the Anti-Defamation League got involved in the story.

On January 23, one day before the announcement was officially promulgated, the ADL issued a [press release](#) whose intent, to thwart the lifting of the excommunications, was clear from their headline: “ADL to Vatican: Do Not Rehabilitate Holocaust Denier Bishop.” When

the first ADL press release failed to derail the lifting of the excommunications, the ADL followed up one day later with [another press release](#): “ADL disappointed in Pope’s Decision to Rehabilitate Holocaust Denier Bishop.” In the second ADL press release on the Williamson incident, Foxman claimed that Benedict’s decision to lift the excommunications “undermines the strong relationship between Catholics and Jews that flourished under Pope John Paul II and which Benedict said he would continue when he came into his papacy.” Foxman then mentioned Vatican II and “the centuries-long history of anti-Semitism in the Church,” which Vatican II was supposed to redress, claiming that Pope Benedict’s action was “a most troubling setback.”

If anyone had any doubts about the purpose behind the ADL press releases, Charlotte Knoblauch, president of the German Council of Jews, laid them to rest when she told the *Rheinische Post* in Germany, “I would like an outcry in the church against such actions from the pope.”

Der Spiegel, Germany’s socialist weekly, then began orchestrating that outcry, putting the pope on the cover of the next week’s issue along with the claim that the “German pope had embarrassed the Church.” In the [January 26, 2009 issue of Spiegel Online International](#), Rabbi David Rosen, head of the American Jewish Committee, was quoted as saying, “In welcoming an open Holocaust denier into the Catholic Church without any recantation on his part, the Vatican has made a mockery of John Paul II’s moving and impressive repudiation and condemnation of anti-Semitism.” The vice president of the Central Council of Jews, Dieter Graumann, accused the pope of an “incomprehensible act of provocation. The fact that it is of all things a German pope who conjured up this new ice age between Jews and the Catholic Church . . . that is something particularly painful, astonishing, and deplorable.”

Germany’s newspapers then followed the lead set by the world’s major Jewish organizations, which is to say, they condemned the pope’s actions via appeals to Vatican II and invidious comparisons between Benedict and his predecessor, as when the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung wrote: “it remains a mystery why the pope is now making such concessions to the fanatical opponents of the Second Vatican Council, that he is making a mockery of his predecessor John Paul II’s insistence on obedience to the teachings of the church and to the pope.”

Two weeks after the pope signed the letter lifting the excommunications, *Der Spiegel* was still on his case, this time for appointing Gerhard Maria Wagner as auxiliary bishop in Linz. Wagner had earned the ire of *Spiegel* because he has “a knack for inappropriate comments,” including “claiming in 2005 in a parish newsletter” that “Hurricane Katrina was an act of ‘divine retribution’ for New Orleans’ permissive ways.” Wagner had similarly inappropriate views about Harry Potter books and the tsunami in Thailand. Taken altogether these views rendered Wagner unacceptable as a bishop, according to *Der Spiegel*.

All of this raises the question: why does *Spiegel* have a dog in this fight? Who gave a socialist magazine in Germany veto rights over who the pope appoints as auxiliary bishop in Linz? Does this mean the Church has veto rights the next time a Spiegel sympathizer like Guenther Grass gets nominated for a Nobel Prize?

Before long, anyone who had an agenda and was willing to dump on the pope got a hearing in the German press. On a normal news day at *Der Spiegel*, Hans Kueng was treated with dismissive condescension if not contempt. Years ago, *Spiegel* reported on a phone call Kueng received after Pope John Paul I died. A Vatican official was on the other end of the line wondering if Kueng would like to become pope. After considering the proposition for a moment Kueng declined the honor, explaining “If I were pope, I’d no longer be infallible.”

But that was then. Now the *Spiegel* was rehabilitating Kueng Germany's great prophet, and Kueng responded by producing what had to be the most moronic piece of journalism generated by the entire Williamson affair, namely, "If Obama were Pope." "It is no coincidence that the Pope celebrated his 81st birthday in the White House," Kueng hinted darkly. "Both Bush and Ratzinger are unteachable in matters of birth control and abortion, disinclined to implement any serious reforms, arrogant and without transparency in the way in which they exercise their office, restricting freedoms and human rights." By lifting the schism, Pope Benedict "has confirmed all the fears which arose when he was elected pope." Before long, Kueng's agenda came to the fore: "What would a Pope do who acted in the spirit of Obama?" Well, he would do what Hans Kueng has been complaining about for decades now, namely, "he could authorize contraception over night, permit the marriage of priests, make possible the ordination of women and allow eucharistic fellowship with Protestant churches." What all this had to do with Holocaust denial or schism wasn't immediately clear. What was clear, though, was *Spiegel's* attempt to mobilize Hans Kueng's German fifth column as a way of weakening the pope's authority. The veiled threat was becoming clearer with each intemperate outburst: admit the SSPX and the German Left will leave the Church.

Reaction from Germany was vehement to the point of hysteria. It was as if the fact that the pope was German somehow obliged them to be anti-Catholic in the same way that the Holocaust obliged them to be anti-German. Beyond that, there was the undeniable fact that Germany had criminalized the thought crime of Holocaust denial in 1994. If the pope failed to condemn "Holocaust denial," it put German Catholics in legal jeopardy, but did Germany have a jail big enough for 20 million Catholics? That seemed a bit far-fetched. But the thought of revocation of the "Kirchensteuer," the tax money the German government paid to the Church, was enough to send shivers down the spines of theologians and bishops. Hence, the uproar. Walter Cardinal Kasper tried to play the whole thing down, attributing the biggest church-state crisis in Germany since the Reformation to "management errors." But the theologians were having none of this.

Hermann Haering, a liberal German Catholic theologian, said that the Pope should resign "for the good of the Church." Werner Thissen, bishop of Hamburg, claimed that the lifting of the excommunications had led to "a loss of confidence in the pope." Christoph Schoenborn, bishop of Vienna, came close to claiming that Bishop Williamson had committed the unforgivable sin, when he opined that "he who denies the Holocaust cannot be rehabilitated within the Church." Gerhard Ludwig Mueller, the bishop in Pope Benedict's home city of Regensburg, outdid Schoenborn in fraternal charity by announcing that Williamson would not be welcome in its churches.

The lack of support that the pope had among his fellow German bishops became even more apparent when their spokesman Matthias Kopp appeared on German television. Matthias Kopp [claimed](#) that because Pope John Paul II signed a concordat with Israel in 1993 (an agreement, by the way, which Israel has yet to honor) the Church has obligated itself to "fight every form of anti-Semitism." Kopp, however, failed to define even one form of anti-Semitism, thereby playing into the hands of organizations like the ADL. "Every form of anti-Semitism" (*jede Form des Antisemitismus*) long ago became another word for Jewish hegemony over the Church because the operative definition of anti-Semitism invariably ends up be the definition promoted by groups like the ADL and Abe Foxman. This means that the Church must adopt Jewish categories in its internal governance, which in turn means that schism takes a back seat to "Holocaust denial" when it comes to defining the gravity of the sin.

Kopp [pressed further](#) into the theological equivalent of terra incognita when he asserted that the Church had to censure Bishop Williamson, because combating "every form of anti-

Semitism” now “belongs to the Magisterium of the Church” (“*Das sind Elemente, die zur Lehre der Kirche dazugehoeren*”). The press secretary of the German Bishops’ Conference claimed that the Holocaust was now part of Catholic dogma. Taking his cue on Church teaching from a law which was passed in Germany in 1994, Kopp concludes that “the Holocaust cannot be denied.” The reasoning goes as follows: “The Holocaust is not denied by the Church. Therefore, a bishop who has returned to the Church after 20 years of schism cannot deny the holocaust. . . . He must conform to the teaching of the Church” (“*Also hat er sich der Lehre der Kirche anzupassen.*”) (Kreuz.net Monday, January 26, 2009). The fact that Kopp lives in a country which has outlawed historical research on certain topics does not change the fact that the Church can pronounce infallibly on matters of faith and morals but has no mandate whatsoever to pass judgments on historical matters like how many people died in concentration camps and how they died, the matters which Bishop Williamson brought up in his interview. In matters where she cannot speak authoritatively, the Church allows the faithful to form their own opinions, everywhere it seems but in Germany.

Spiegel accused the Vatican of having an “an apparent tin ear” (a phrase which probably lost something in the translation) on matters dealing with the Jews, homosexuals, women, etc. etc., and as an example of this “tin ear” mentioned “moves to have the war-time Pope Pius XII, who is accused by some of having turned a blind eye to the mass deportation and murder of Jews, named a saint.”

The status of Pius XII was especially apropos in this regard. I’m tempted to say that his cause has been in Limbo ever since the Jews objected, except that Pope Benedict XVI doesn’t believe in Limbo. The status of the causes of Pius XII and Father Dehon crossed my mind while attending a lecture by Archbishop Angelo Amato, prefect for the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, who spoke on Secularism in Europe at Notre Dame, the same week *l’affaire Williamson* was raging in the press. Rather than listen to the archbishop shadow box with secularism, it would have been much more interesting to hear him explain how organized Jewry (hereafter, the Jews) had gained veto power over whom the Catholics were allowed to name as saints. The case of Pius XII, whose canonization is on hold, as well as the still unresolved case of Father Dehon, whose canonization was postponed because the Jews accused him of anti-Semitism, are only two cases in point. What implications did this stance have for church unity throughout history? Would it be possible, I wondered, for St. John Chrysostom to be canonized by the Church today? Certainly not, if *Adversos Iudeos* had to be vetted by the Italian Rabbis or Abe Foxman.

The unspoken but all-pervasive issue at the heart of *l’affaire Williamson* came down to a question of who was running the Catholic Church and whose dogmas had the final say in Church governance. Did Jewish concern over holocaust denial trump what Canon 1382 had to say about schism? If so why? Or were the Jews simply using this as an excuse to promote more division in the Church? Williamson himself had said on Dinoscopus.blogspot.com that “the media uproar was surely timed and orchestrated to block the decree.” The Jews, once again, were promoting division. Since the lifting of the excommunications was only the first step in repairing the Lefebvrite schism, the media attack was meant to ensure that that complete reconciliation would not happen.

Undeterred by the ADL’s threat and their orchestration of the world media against the Church, the Vatican released the letter lifting the excommunications on Saturday, January 24. The Vatican’s initial statements showed calm and resolve by trying to separate the two issues the Jews and the world press were determined to conflate, namely, schism and holocaust denial. “This act regards the lifting of the excommunications, period,” Vatican spokesman Father Federico Lombardi [told reporters](#), “It has nothing to do with the personal opinions of one person, which are open to criticism, but are not pertinent to this decree.”

On January 28 at the end of his general audience on Wednesday, [the pope reiterated the reasons](#) that led to the lifting of the excommunications, none of which had anything to do with the Holocaust or how many people died or how they died:

Precisely in order to fulfill the service of unity, which distinguished in a special way my ministry as Successor of Peter, I decided a number of days ago to grant the remission of the excommunication that four bishops had incurred when they were ordained by Archbishop Lefebvre in 1988 without a pontifical mandate. I carried out this action of paternal tenderness because these bishops had repeatedly expressed to me their acute suffering over the situation in which they found themselves. I hope that this gesture of mine will be followed by concerted effort on their part to take the further steps necessary to realize full communion with the Church, testifying in this way to their true fidelity and true recognition of the magisterium and authority of the Pope and of Vatican Council II.

He concluded his daily Wednesday audience by saying that he wanted to “express my full and indisputable solidarity with our Brothers and Sisters who received the First Covenant, I trust that the memory of the Shoah will induce humankind to reflect upon the unpredictable power of evil when it conquers the heart of man.”

The reports in the press invariably involved a skewing of the pope’s words. Michelle Boorstein, [writing for the *Washington Post*](#), wrote that Benedict told “pilgrims in his weekly audience in Vatican City that he feels ‘full and indisputable’ solidarity with Jews and repudiating the idea of denying the Holocaust.”

“If the pope is in full solidarity with the Jews,” one Catholic wondered after reading the report in the *Washington Post*, “where does that leave us [Catholics]? Should we all become Jews?”

Boorstein went on to claim that Williamson “denied that the Holocaust occurred” when in fact (as she herself mentioned) his statements, however, lamentable, had to do with numbers and technicalities. The pope fared no better in Boorstein’s account, an account full of misrepresentations like the following:

In his short tenure as pope, Benedict has caused concerns among other faith leaders before. He sparked deadly riots across the Muslim world in 2006 by citing a 14th century characterization of the prophet Muhammad as “evil and inhuman.” Jewish groups protested in 2007 when he expanded use of traditional liturgy—a priority among groups such as St. Pius X —that on Good Friday called for Catholics to pray for “the faithless Jews.” After protests, the next year he required all Catholics to remove the word “faithless.”

The Boorstein account in the *Washington Post* blundered from one error to another. At a certain point it became difficult to dismiss her ineptitude as simple incompetence. “Catholic officials,” Boorstein continued, “say anti-Semitic comments by any of the bishops, while possibly abhorrent, are not heretical.” The statement ignored the fact that no one in the Church had raised the issue of (much less defined the term) anti-Semitism, nor had anyone explained how questioning the details of how Jews died was anti-Semitic, according to any definition of the term.

As the volume of the outcry increased, Vatican resolve began to crumble, and comment began to proliferate, making a bad situation worse. As if to show that Rome could shoot itself in the foot without the help of the *Washington Post*, *L’Osservatore Romano* published an

article by Anna Foa, a Jewish professor of history at the University of Rome “La Sapienza,” on the topic of “Negazionismo,” the Italian term for Holocaust denial. Foa’s article, “Antisemitism is the only motive of the Deniers,” was so apodictic it made papal bulls look like models of empirical induction by comparison. In contrast to the measured approach of Raul Hilberg, the Jewish dean of Holocaust studies, Foa, offering no evidence other than her ability as a mind reader, dismissed David Irving’s credentials as an historian. She went on to claim that “Anti-Jewish hatred is at the origin of this denial.... There is only one motive, one intention, behind denial of the Holocaust: antisemitism. All the rest is lies.”

On January 27, 2009, Bishop Bernard Fellay, the Superior General of the Society of St. Pius X, joined the Vatican’s efforts at damage control when he announced that Bishop Williamson had been silenced. “Our Society claims no authority over historical or other secular matters,” Fellay wrote. If so, then it was not clear why the Society was silencing him, since what Williamson said could not be construed as heretical or contrary to faith or morals. Again it came down to a question of who had the right to declare an action sinful, the Church or the World.

Writing from a traditionalist perspective, Christopher Ferrara had similar difficulties distinguishing between what the Church considers important and where she leaves her children the freedom to make up their own minds. Ferrara took issue with [Andrew Rabel, who claimed](#)

The SSPX reverts to the penalties given by Rome prior to the episcopal consecrations and all four bishops in the Society remain suspended *a divinis*. The society remains a group of Catholics in an irregular state. No chapel of the SSPX in the world is in communion with the Universal Church, and its priests sharing in the suspension are deprived of the clerical state (a separate matter from the validity of their ordinations). They cannot offer the sacraments of matrimony and penance validly because that requires faculties from a local bishop... But a significant hurdle in the way of full ecclesial communion for the Society, appears to have been removed.

Ferrara disputed the claims made by both George Weigel and Andrew Rabel, that the society remained in “an irregular state” but in so doing involved himself in bizarre self-contradictions. Ferrara claimed that the pope’s action proved that the SSPX was never in schism in the first place, a claim which causes one to wonder why Ferrara is rejoicing at the lifting of the excommunications. In trying to explain his position, Ferrara only confuses the issue, as for instance when [he writes](#):

To begin with, it can no longer be said by anyone in good faith that the four surviving bishops of the Society are “in schism.” Further, those who have spent the past twenty years calumniating the priests and lay adherents of the Society as “schismatics” have finally been deprived of even the pretense of a canonical basis for this insult.

Well, which is it? If there was nothing irregular about the state of the SSPX, why are we all rejoicing at the lifting of the excommunications? Brian Mershon attempted to bring clarity to the situation by writing to Msgr. Camille Perl, vice president of the Pontifical Commission *Ecclesia Dei*, who responded on May 23, 2008. In response to the question of whether the society is in schism, Perl refers to the Episcopal ordinations as “schismatic” but then adds

“While it is true that participation in the Mass at chapels of the Society of St. Pius X does not of itself constitute “formal adherence to the schism” (cf. *Ecclesia Dei* 5, c),

such adherence can come about over a period of time as one slowly imbibes a schismatic mentality which separates itself from the teaching of the Supreme Pontiff and the entire Catholic Church. While we hope and pray for a reconciliation with the Society of St. Pius X, the Pontifical Commission “Ecclesia Dei” cannot recommend that members of the faithful frequent their chapels for the reasons which we have outlined above. We deeply regret this situation and pray that soon a reconciliation of the Society of St. Pius X with the Church may come about, but until such time the explanations which we have given remain in force.”

If the SSPX is not in schism now because of the lifting of the excommunications, then it would logically follow that they were in schism before the excommunications were lifted. But Ferrara can't bring himself to state either proposition clearly. Instead he argues that

in justice the Society and its one million adherents must now be seen by everyone as a bona fide “ecclesial movement” within the Catholic Church, with any remaining issues being precisions of canonical regularity to be resolved by further decrees.

Ferrara can't have it both ways. By claiming that the SSPX was not in an irregular situation before the lifting of the excommunications, he nullifies the point which the lifting of the excommunications made. But if what he says about schism is true, why did he add the word “now” to the previous passage? If there were no problems, why were there excommunications? If there was no lifting of the excommunications, why is Ferrara rejoicing?

THE BRUNT

Ferrara focuses the brunt of his attack on Bishop Williamson and accuses him of being a holocaust denier. In canonical terms this is known as straining at the gnat but swallowing the camel. Ferrara can't seem to distinguish between schism, which is a grave sin according to the authentic teaching of the Church, and discussions of how many people died in World War II and how they died, which, no matter how inane or unfounded these views might be, do not rise to the level of excommunicable offense, not in the Catholic Church at least. In order to have his excommunication lifted, Bishop Fellay had to make “the commitment to avoid every public intervention which does not respect the person of the Holy Father and which may be negative to ecclesial charity.” It is a phrase that may have given Ferraro pause, but if so, not for long because Ferrara goes on to excuse his own attacks on the “conciliar popes” as

in keeping with the due liberty of the members of the Mystical Body, and indeed their duty to speak out when they believe in conscience that the common good of the Church is being harmed, even should that harm involve acts or omissions of the Supreme Pontiff himself.

Ferrara then goes on to impose the canons of political correctness on any traditionalist who doubts the conventional narrative of World War II. In fact, he continues,

It is time, then, for traditionalists to repudiate the inadmissible opinions of Bishop Richard Williamson, with due respect for his dignity as a descendant of the Apostles. For the good of the Church we must make it clear that the Bishop's opinions are not those of the worldwide “traditionalist movement” (if we must call it that). Above all, we must not allow the Society or the movement as a whole to be draped with the albatross of the Bishop's opinion on how many Jews perished at the hands of the Nazis.

Traditionalism, as espoused by Ferrara, is the Catholic world turned upside down. In this

world it's acceptable to be a schism denier, but when it comes to thought crimes like "Holocaust denial," traditionalists of the Ferrara stripe are far less tolerant. This is precisely the attitude Msgr. Perl warned against when he wrote that "over a period of time ... one slowly imbibes a schismatic mentality which separates itself from the teaching of the Supreme Pontiff and the entire Catholic Church." Traditionalists, in other words, can engage in all of the attacks on the papacy which Bishop Fellay had to abjure in order to have the excommunications lifted, as long as they tow the line on political correctness:

Therefore, not only this newspaper [The Remnant], but every journal of traditional Catholic opinion, and above all the Society itself, must clearly and unequivocally declare--as I do here and now--that Holocaust revisionism, wacky conspiracy theories, and other such nonsense will have no part in the traditionalist movement.

Ferrara's formulation of the issue is deeply schismatic in its orientation. Who cares about the so-called "traditionalist movement" or what its self-appointed leaders teach, or who they want to exclude from their "movement"? By defining themselves as a "movement," the traditionalists have separated themselves from the Church. The real issue is what the Catholic Church teaches, not what needs to be done to police "the movement."

Now that Ferrara has brought up the term in a theological context, what exactly is holocaust revisionism? Do Catholics now have to accept the Hitler's diaries as authentic? What about the stories of lampshades made out of the skin of Jewish concentration camp inmates? What about the flaming pits which gave the name to the holocaust? What about the electrocution and head-bashing machines? What about the touching story of the all-Negro 761st tank battalion which liberated the Jewish inmates of Buchenwald, as depicted on the PBS documentary "Liberators"? Was that part of the Holocaust narrative? If so, it was exposed as a hoax by Jeffrey Goldberg and others in the *New York Times*, which had previously given serious, if naïve, coverage to this story. What about the equally touching story of love in the concentration camps that was recounted on Oprah and exposed as a hoax the week before *l'affaire Williamson* broke? Professor David O'Connell was accused of going to "the brink of Holocaust Denial" by none other than thought cop Deborah Lipstadt for writing an [article in Culture Wars](#) about the inconsistencies in Elie Wiesel's holocaust narrative *Night*. Who knew that literary criticism could land you in jail?

Ferrara loses sight of the big issue in his rush to turn Bishop Williamson over to the thought police. The big issue at the heart of the Williamson affair is religious. It has to do with which religion is true: Christianity or what Rabbi Jacob Neusner referred to as "the Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption." Elie Wiesel made the situation clear in 1971 when he claimed that "The sincere Christian knows that what died in Auschwitz was not the Jewish people but Christianity." *L'affaire Williamson* was an attempt on the part of the world's Jewish organizations to force the pope to accept their dogmas as normative for Catholics. It was an attempt to force Christians to accept what St. Paul in Titus 1:14 refers to as "Jewish fables" as superior to Christian dogmas. This is not to deny the reality of Jewish suffering during World War II. This admission, however, must be joined to a similar concession, namely, that no one can define the boundaries of the Holocaust narrative. Must Catholics accept parts of the Holocaust narrative which everyone now admits never happened? St. Paul tells us that there are "a great many people . . . who talk nonsense and try to make others believe it, particularly among those of the Circumcision." Instead of telling us to go along with these liars "who ruin whole families by teaching things which they ought not to, and doing it with the vile motive of making money," Paul tells Titus to "stop taking notice of Jewish myths." It's a message that Christopher Ferrara would do well to take to heart rather than demand that Bishop Williamson give his assent to a narrative full of "Jewish fables," many of which have gone down the memory hole over the past half century. Lest anyone

think I am exaggerating we should remember that the ADL has denounced Norman Finkelstein as a Holocaust Denier (he has never doubted the existence of gas chambers or that millions of Jews were systematically killed) and that Alan Dershowitz has gone as far as to say that the leading expert on the Holocaust, Raul Hilberg, is to be found on the spectrum of Holocaust Denial because of his support of Finkelstein!

AN APOLOGY

Bishop Williamson issued an apology on January 28, 2009. In it he claimed that he was responsible for a “tremendous media storm stirred up by imprudent remarks of mine on Swedish television.” Citing Jonas I: 12, Williamson suggested that the pope “Take me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.”

Although Pope Benedict and Cardinal Castrillon Hoyos would have been happy to grant Bishop Williamson his wish, it wouldn't have helped. This storm was not of Bishop Williamson's making. Williamson's actions were indisputably “imprudent,” as he himself admitted, but God was using them to bring about a long-overdue clarification of the Church's current position on the Jews, a position which can be traced back to the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* and is now codified in the *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which claims that “The Church remains faithful to the interpretation of ‘all the Scriptures’” concerning the crucifixion and death of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The Catechism tells us that “The personal sin of the participants (Judas, the Sandhedrin, Pilate) is known to God alone. . . . Hence, we cannot lay responsibility for the trial on the Jews in Jerusalem as a whole, despite the outcry of a manipulated crowd and the global reproaches contained in the apostles' calls to conversion after Pentecost.” The Catechism ignores the distinction between the Jewish minority, who were ignorant and manipulated, and the majority, who hated Jesus and wanted him dead. The Scripture passages which the Catechism dismisses as “global reproaches” invariably insist on the guilt of the Jews not their ignorance. The difference is largely one of time. The more that time passed, the more convinced the Apostles became of Jewish guilt for rejecting Christ. *Nostra Aetate* tends to rely on Acts 3:17 and ignores I Thess 2: 14-15 as one of those “global reproaches.” In that passage St. Paul addresses the community in Thessalonika as: “You, my brothers,” who have been “suffering the same treatment from your own countrymen as they have suffered from the Jews, the people who put the Lord Jesus to death, and the prophets too. And now they have been persecuting us, and acting in a way that cannot please God and makes them the enemies of the whole human race”

The Catechism then goes on to propose *Nostra Aetate* (“Neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his Passion The Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy Scripture.”) as the lens through which we must now interpret I Thess 2: 14-15.

As Bishop Fellay's comments on the lifting of the excommunications indicated, this move involves a total inversion of the hermeneutic of the Church. The world has been turned upside down. The same Church which traditionally specified that every council document should be read in the light of tradition is now saying that tradition should now be viewed in the light of a project (“the spirit of Vatican II” if you will) which turns the interpretations of one council into a meta-Magisterium.


Before long it becomes clear that the point of the Catechism's section on the Jews is not only to cast doubt on the literal meaning of passages like I Thess 2: 14-16 and a host of other passages, but also to exonerate the Jews from any responsibility for the passion and death of Christ. The main way the Catechism does this is by insisting then that “sinners were the

authors and the ministers of all the sufferings that the divine Redeemer endured” and that “our crime in this case is greater in us than in the Jews.”

This may be an indictment of sinful Christians, but it is hardly an exoneration of the Jews, even though it is always portrayed in that light. No matter what Abe Foxman says, it should be obvious that the terms “Jews” and “sinners” are not mutually exclusive categories. In fact the rejection of Jesus Christ and the collaboration in his murder makes all of the Jews involved in that conspiracy sinners. This indictment, of course, does not extend to the Jewish race as a whole, i.e., to people like the Blessed Mother, the beloved disciple, the apostles, St. Paul, etc.: hence, the Church’s ongoing and constant condemnation of anti-Semitism, which is totally irrational from a Christian perspective because it condemns the race which produced Jesus Christ.

However, it does mean that every Jew who called for Christ’s death and asked that “his blood be on us and our children,” as well as every Jew since that time who has rejected Jesus Christ shares responsibility for his death because of their participation in the sin of rejecting him. Paul addresses this on-going rejection of Logos when he says that the Jews “never stop trying to finish off the sins they have begun.” As a result, “retribution is overtaking them at last.” So *Nostra Aetate* is correct when it claims that Scripture proposes no “curse.” The “retribution” which Paul describes comes about as a result not of some curse placed on the Jews; no, on the contrary, it flows naturally from their rejection of Logos.

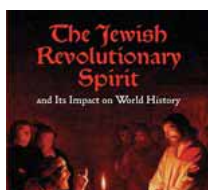
But let’s leave the accusation Paul levels against the Jews as “the people who put the Lord Jesus to death” aside for a moment. What about his claim that the Jews are “the enemies of the whole human race”? The Catechism, citing Vatican II, tells us that “The Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from Holy Scripture.” How are we then to reconcile these two statements? Once again the postconciliar Church is confronted with a hermeneutical issue of its own making. Do we interpret the Spirit of Vatican II in the light of tradition or do we interpret tradition in light of the Spirit of Vatican II?

By January 29, it was clear that this issue lay at the heart of the conflict and that it was going to reassert itself willy nilly even after Bishop Fellay silenced Bishop Williamson, because the repressed, as Sigmund Freud taught, always returns. 

[E. Michael Jones](#) is editor of [Culture Wars Magazine](#).

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