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## KURT WALDHEIM AND THE CATHOLIC PROBLEM

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There is No "Jewish Problem" / The Recurring "Catholic Problem" / The Vatican-Nazi Concordat / A Righteous Priest in Berlin / The Vatican and the PLO / The Proper Response to Waldheim

### **There is No "Jewish Problem"**

People used to talk about "the Jewish problem." There never was such a thing. To be sure, there have always been plenty of Jewish problems. But the Jewish problem implies that Jewish existence as such is a problem, and this it has always been only in the minds of anti-Semites, or else in consequence of anti-Semitic actions, such as medieval church legislation that drove Jews first from the land, and then from one occupation after another, until no means of livelihood were left for them except money-lending and trying to sell second-hand pants. Hence the expression "the Jewish problem" should be as much out of bounds as "Jewish vermin," especially ever since the "solution" that the "problem" was viewed as requiring,

and in the end receiving, was The Final Solution.

### **The Recurring "Catholic Problem"**

There is, in contrast, a Catholic problem. It is real, and exists by no means only in someone else's mind, or in consequence of someone else's actions. Its clearest recent expression has been the Vatican's invitation to Austrian President Kurt Waldheim. The official Vatican explanation is that this was merely a political act, one of diplomatic courtesy, and that it did not involve taking sides in one way or the other in the controversy currently surrounding Waldheim's past. This explanation, however, far from solving the problem of this particular act on the part of the Vatican, merely reveals the

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Catholic problem as a whole, with a sharpness unequalled since the days of the Second World War. (a) As "Vicar of Christ," the pope is a spiritual authority, and this far beyond his own Catholic community. (b) However, unlike other spiritual authorities of comparable stature -- if such there are -- he is also a political authority, representing as he does all Catholics and indeed being head of a state. Can a pope recognize anyone in his political capacity without also lending him prestige in his spiritual capacity? He cannot -- and this is the heart of the Catholic problem.

### **The Vatican-Nazi Concordat**

The sharpest previous expression of the Catholic problem began to take shape when in 1933 Cardinal Pacelli (subsequently Pope Pius XII) signed a concordat with Nazi Germany. Later he explained that at the time this act was necessary in order to save the German Catholic Church. He must have meant "save it politically," for he would have done far more to save spiritually, not only the German Catholic Church in particular, but also the Catholic Church in general, had he refused to sign any such document. To be sure, such a refusal might have caused an intense Nazi persecution of German Catholics, but it would also have raised the stature of the Catholic Church -- as a whole to spiritual heights unequalled in centuries, or perhaps even without precedent in its entire bi-millennial history. In signing the concordat, in contrast, the Cardinal willy-nilly boosted the prestige of the Nazi regime -- and, while causing it to soften its persecution of Catholics, willy-nilly encouraged it to persecute others. The Vatican-Nazi concordat thus compromised the Catholic Church in its claim to being ruled by more than just another group of pragmatic politicians. Moreover, from the blemish of this act the Church has yet to recover. For if there has been any public papal confession of the Church's great sin of

that fateful act of 1933, it has not been public enough for anyone to have heard of it. Much has been heard, in contrast, by way of apologies for the act of then-Cardinal Pacelli, as well of his subsequent actions -- or rather lack of actions -- in his capacity as Pope Pius XII.

One apology has been that in 1933 the then-Cardinal in charge of Vatican foreign affairs, while knowing much about the evils of communism, had no way of knowing for sure what the new German regime was going to do. The Vatican-Waldheim affair, in contrast, took place long after it was well-known what that regime had done; that whereas, like other evil empires in past and present, it was guilty of crimes against humanity, unlike all others past or present it invented the institution of murder camps equipped with gas chambers. To have copied this institution is one accusation one cannot level against any other current regime, the Soviet included. Unhappily, however, we can make no predictions in this regard about the future. Some future regime may very well decide that gas chambers were a bright idea, deserving to be copied. And then it may very well be relevant what past government was pragmatic enough to observe diplomatic protocol with the Nazi regime that invented the institution -- or with figures whose past during the Nazi regime is considered dubious in responsible quarters. The Vatican cannot plead ignorance of the Nazi gas chambers. (It doesn't, for it has just beatified Edith Stein, who died a Catholic, but was murdered in the gas chambers because she was a Jewess.) Nor can it plead ignorance of the fact of the fallibility of Waldheim's memory about his role during the war, and of the further fact that the accusations against that role are serious enough to have caused two governments, the American and Canadian, to declare the current president of Austria persona non grata. As a non-Catholic, one thinks of the Vatican-Waldheim affair; as a friend one

not only thinks of the Catholic problem but also looks for signs in the direction of a solution -- and one is filled with sorrow.

The Vatican-Waldheim affair discloses not only the Catholic problem in general, but also yet a third element in it. The Nazi gas chambers were invented not only for murder in general, or even genocide in general. Arguably they were invented for one purpose only: to single out one people, the Jews, for genocide without remainder, i.e., quite literally "extermination," comparable only -- and in fact frequently compared -- to the extermination of vermin. Even so the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews discloses yet this third aspect of the Catholic problem: (c) the early Fathers of the Catholic Church invented the idea that Cain rather than Abraham was the father of the Jewish people. Some may say by way of apologetics that this was "so long ago as no longer to be true." However, the application of this German problem is false, for the Church never repudiated this evil doctrine decisively enough to extirpate it forever. To be sure, Church doctrine through the ages taught that Jews were to be tolerated by dint of Christian charity; yet as hereditary murderers they were made into the only people on earth without a right to exist. Hitler, Himmler and Eichmann put this latter doctrine into unprecedented practice when they treated Jews as if they were vermin. Of the three, two were Austrian and all three were baptized Catholics. To be sure, they were radical anti-Catholic, for they considered charity not as a virtue but as a vice, and the vice was unforgivable when practiced toward Jews. But no truly thoughtful person, least of all a Catholic one, can fail to recognize that they were also ex-Catholic. Thus the Jews-as-children-of-Cain tradition in the Church is not only part and parcel of the Catholic problem; after the Holocaust, it is also the one part that, more than any other, veritably cries out for a solution.

This is why Jewish friends of numerous Catholics (of whom this writer is one) are not only outraged by the Waldheim-Vatican affair; they are also filled with sorrow on behalf of their friends in the Church itself. To be sure, there are many who treat the Holocaust as having happened "so long ago as no longer to be true." Others are brazen enough to deny that it ever happened. And many good people wittingly or unwittingly distort what the Holocaust was, among them the Church itself when it beatifies Edith Stein as though she had chosen Christian martyrdom when in fact hers was a choiceless Jewish death. (An Anglo-Catholic journal rightly states that if Edith Stein was to be beatified, so should have been all the six million Jews; but this view, it seems, has yet to penetrate into the Vatican.) If a Jew is filled not only with outrage by the Waldheim-Vatican affair, but also with sorrow in behalf of the Church itself, it is because he if anyone knows that the shadows of the Holocaust will not melt away. The Waldheim-Vatican affair will haunt the Church, if not today or tomorrow, then a century or two hence.

#### **A Righteous Priest in Berlin**

That the shadows of the Holocaust will not melt away is known to many Catholics also, and these have made attempts to move toward a solution of the post-Holocaust Catholic problem ever since the catastrophe occurred, and indeed during the Holocaust itself. Monks and nuns in monasteries risked their lives, giving shelter to Jews. And then there was that unforgettable figure -- forgotten, it seems, in the Vatican -- Domprobst Bernhard Lichtenberg of Berlin. After the Krystallnacht of 1938, when synagogues were burning all over Germany, he prayed daily and publicly for the persecuted German Jews. At length arrested and jailed for the "crime" of publicly using the word "Jew," he refused to recant, applied for permission to accompany the Berlin Jews

who were then being deported one knew not where, and wondered what the Holy Father would think of the idea. But what Lichtenberg did every day in dangerous Nazi Berlin -- pray for Jews publicly and by name -- the Vicar of the Christ never did even once in the safety of the Vatican. Edith Stein was beatified as a Catholic saint when she was murdered as a Jewess. The one Catholic who above all others should be beatified is Domprobst Lichtenberg, who dared to say publicly the unmentionable word "Jew." But then, this would highlight the fact that the head of his Church -- after all, a political as well as a spiritual head -- never used the unmentionable word even once where alone it counted, namely, in public.

Predictably, Lichtenberg's request to accompany the Berlin Jews was denied; sent to a concentration camp instead, the old man died on the way. After his burial a Protestant walked over to a Catholic and said, "Today they buried a saint."

That was then and there. Here and now, there are heads of Catholic colleges, famous theologians and much ordinary Catholic folk that do all they can in an attempt to solve the Catholic problem, or at least that aspect of it that after the Holocaust cries out for a solution. Helpful in countless ways, they are fruitless in the central respect, for a simple reason. Only one person is in the position to undertake the task: the Vicar of the Christ himself.

### **The Vatican and the PLO**

There has been one such Vicar who did address himself to the Catholic problem: Pope John of blessed memory. He composed a prayer in which forgiveness is asked in behalf of his Church for the sin of having unjustly placed the mark of Cain upon the Jewish people. The prayer implies repentance, and repentance in turn is genuine only if it is followed by appropriate actions. The papal actions that have followed, however, have fallen far short of the necessary mark. Of this the

recent Vatican-Waldheim affair is only the most recent proof. Prior proof was given by the current occupant of Peter's throne by his reception, some years ago, of PLO chief Yassir Arafat. One would not wish to deny him the right to receive Palestinian Arabs, or even Yassir Arafat if in his judgment they had no better representative. But how in receiving him could he act as though the PLO National Covenant did not exist? That document (to which Arafat is committed to this day) asserts that the Palestinians are a people, entitled to a state -- and goes on to deny that Jews are a people entitled to a state: they are merely a tolerated religious denomination. This is pretty close to the Church's own traditional teaching about Jews and their right to existence. (It is a far cry from Pope John and his prayer.) In receiving the PLO chief while ignoring the PLO National Covenant -- presumably both in his political capacity -- he willy-nilly boosted in his spiritual capacity the prestige not only of Arafat but also of the Covenant. And that document denies that Jews are a people with a right to exist, and asserts the PLO's right to destroy their state.

The current pope might have moved on in the spirit of Pope John's prayer, and in so doing taken a huge step toward the solution of the Catholic problem, had he received his Palestinian guest with every courtesy and then asked him this question in the glare of world-wide publicity: "Tell me, Mr. Arafat, on what terms would you accept the legitimacy of the State of Israel?" Arafat is a shrewd politician. Hence while quite a few people have tried to pin him down on that crucial question, no one of significance has succeeded. By virtue of his spiritual authority the pope is probably the only person who could have pinned the wily PLO chief down; and whatever Arafat's answer, it would have contributed immeasurably to peace in the Middle East, even as the pope's question would have contributed immeasurably to

the solution of the Catholic problem. However, the pope failed the great test. Presumably this was because, like Pius XII before him, he wished to "save the Catholic Church," this time not in Germany but somewhere else.

In relation to Hitler, when "Jew" was the unmentionable word, Pope Pius XII, unlike Canon Lichtenberg, failed to mention it. In relation to Arafat and the likes of him, when the unmentionable word is "Jewish state," Pope John Paul II did not mention that. Though well-remembered in some circles of the Catholic Church, Pope John's prayer, it seems, is forgotten in the Vatican.

This blunt judgment is necessary despite friendly gestures here and there toward the Jewish people on the part of the present pope. In the post-Holocaust world few enemies of the Jewish people are brazen enough to deny them the right to exist, i.e., to view them individually as children of Cain; and not too many throw bombs into synagogues where Jews are engaged in harmless prayer. The pope's visit to a Rome synagogue was therefore a nice gesture, but it came a century too late: it was not an act for which Jews can be expected to shed tears of gratitude. Required for a solution of the post-Holocaust form of the Catholic problem are actions of quite another sort. In its old form the children-of-Cain calumny may be (hopefully, though one cannot be sure) on its way out; very much on its way in is a new form of that calumny. Now the Jewish state is the offspring of Cain, a murderer by its very existence, the only state in today's world whose right to exist is considered a subject of legitimate debate even by nice people. And in receiving Arafat without asking him the "loaded" question the current pope did his share in legitimating the debate. But then, he could hardly have asked that loaded question, for the Vatican itself has yet to recognize the State of Israel.

The one act Pius XII could have done to atone for his silence during the Holocaust would have been to be the first to recognize the Jewish state. He failed to do so. Pope John reigned too briefly to take the action. None of his successors have done it. In its decisive respect the post-Holocaust Catholic problem remains where it was left by Pope John. There is a prayer for forgiveness that implies repentance. In the highest circles of the Catholic Church the genuineness of the repentance has yet to be proved by the decisive test.

#### **The Proper Response to Waldheim**

And now there has been the Waldheim visit. It occurred a few weeks after the pope's visit to Maidanek. Is the one supposed to legitimize the other? If so, one wishes that he had never gone to Maidanek. There was one thing, and one thing only, that the current pope could have done in response to the election of Catholic Kurt Waldheim as President of Catholic Austria -- one thing, that is, if he is serious about the post-Holocaust form of the Catholic problem. He could have sent a public message to the Austrian government saying that he would be happy to receive its head of state. He would be happy to do so even if it was Kurt Waldheim, provided he either proved his innocence beyond all possible doubt or else made a full confession and gave proof of his genuine repentance, for should the Vicar of Christ not receive repentant sinners? Without these conditions, however, his public message should have gone on to say, he could not possibly receive Kurt Waldheim. Once the pre-Nazi Pope Pius XI, the immediate predecessor of Pius XII, declared that Catholics are spiritually Semites. No longer resorting to code words, however well-intended in pre-Nazi times but now utterly inadequate, Pope John Paul II should have gone on to explain that he could not receive

Kurt Waldheim without the stated conditions because spiritually his flock are Jews.

Once again the current pope failed the great test. Presumably his motive once again was to "save the Catholic Church," although where and why is, this time, completely obscure. (Do all Austrian Catholics approve of Waldheim? Do those who disapprove of him risk persecution?) There is, however, one ray of light in the otherwise gloomy Waldheim-Vatican affair. There now are Catholics the world over who do not wish their Church to be "saved" at so shabby a political price.

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P.S. The above was written before Kurt Waldheim's visit, following that with the pope, to King Hussein of Jordan.

Waldheim's most important remark, although completely overlooked by the media, was his word of thanks to Hussein for his concern for the Christian holy places in Jerusalem. One need not be overly cynical in order to wonder whether in this Waldheim acted as a messenger of the pope.

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Following his retirement as Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto, Professor Emil Fackenheim and his family made aliya in 1983. His most recent books are What is Judaism? [Summit Books] and The Jewish Thought of Emil Fackenheim, Michael Morgan, ed. [Wayne State University Press], both published this year. Professor Fackenheim is a Fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.