

A Moral Reckoning – The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen. Little Brown, 2003, £16.99.

Hitler's Willing Executioners, Daniel Goldhagen's first book, tore on to the political and literary stage like a whirlwind and aroused fierce debate and controversy. Its successor, A Moral Reckoning, may not have aroused quite the same furor, but in its content, its logic, and the remorseless intensity with which it focuses on its subject, it is as coruscating as its predecessor.

Goldhagen divides his book into five sections, Framing the Problem, Clarifying the Conduct, Judging the Culpability, Repairing the Harm, Mustering the Will, and as the titles suggest he works through the facts in meticulous detail from several standpoints before coming to the crunch about practical, political, moral and material reparations for the Catholic Church's actions over nearly two millennia.

Goldhagen surprises those who might be expecting an unremitting diatribe against brutality, murder, persecution, the vilest forms of anti-Semitism and unbelievable bigotry by leavening the text with an acknowledgment of the journey travelled by the Catholics - singling out Vatican II, Nostra Aetate, and the We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah of 1998, for some praise. Unfortunately when juxtaposed with a history as terrible as the Catholic Church's towards the Jewish people, all of these steps are too small, and too late.

Goldhagen demonstrates all too clearly how much Catholics need to confront the awful nature of their past, and the way that their obsession with Jews and Judaism, and their paranoia about the Jewish threat, paved the way for Hitler and the Nazi Genocide. He also makes clear by implication that all moral pronouncements from the Vatican are hollow and irrevocably flawed because they are uttered in the shadow of an un-atoned for crime repeated over the centuries innumerable times.

His suggestions about reparative acts will make uncomfortable reading for many Christians, and will undoubtedly have aroused the ire of the unreconstituted Jew-haters within high Catholic circles, but they are unarguable and all of us have a right to demand a response.

All those engaged in inter-faith relations, and those who are students of the history of the 20th century, should read A Moral Reckoning, but be warned: having done so you will find it impossible to think positively about Popes, the Vatican, or the Catholic Church again.

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