Robert Ventresca and the Harvard Charade

Justus George Lawler Responds to a Review of His Book

Last October, in the Harvard Theological Review, a twenty-four page book review with the following title appeared, “Review Essay, War without End: The Popes and the Jews between Polemic and History.” It was written by a Canadian scholar, Robert A. Ventresca, and the book that was severely critiqued in this “review essay” was the present writer’s Were the Popes Against the Jews? (hereafter WPAA). That title, in turn, was an explicit reference to David Kertzer’s The Popes Against the Jews—a book that Lawler had also severely critiqued.

After the HTR article appeared, I wrote the co-editor, Jon Levenson (one of whose early books I had published), inquiring about the likelihood of his journal carrying in a future issue my response to Ventresca. Also, I was hoping that in light of the fact that “review-essay” was an unusual category—if not a completely new genre—it might be possible to give me a little more time for my reply. In the context of a civil exchange, I was told in effect that such responses had never appeared in the past, and so would not appear in the present. The thought occurred to me, so much for the triumph of tradition over individual talent—something on which T. S. Eliot had written. I was also taken aback by the negative decision itself, since I had made clear that my response would probably be considerably shorter than Ventresca’s rather lengthy article.

Levenson went on to say, “Neither the faults Ventresca finds in your work nor the weaknesses he finds in Kertzer’s were in any way influenced by the co-editors.” While I had to take Levenson at his word, it was also rather clear that from the perspective of these particular editors, the work of Lawler was “faulty,” while that of Kertzer was merely “weak.” The reference to co-editors may also clarify that distinction, since one of them, Kevin Madigan—who will make a cameo appearance shortly—was not only severely criticized in Lawler’s book, he was also cited as an ardent fan of David Kertzer, whom he regarded as “a national treasure.”

Moreover, it seemed obvious that no number of civil exchanges would obscure the fact that in the overall Ventresca viewed Kertzer as a model scholar, one to be praised, admired, and emulated. Of course, Ventresca does supply a modicum of mild—though
always deferential if not actually apologetic—criticism of *The Popes Against the Jews*. All this is intended to authenticate Ventresca’s evenhandedness as a balanced and fair “review essayist,” but some of it obviously represents his personal view of Kertzer as a scholarly and trustworthy student of the papacy’s relations with Jews and Judaism.

Thus it came as no surprise when fairly early in his review Ventresca observed, that “discerning readers can readily appreciate that, despite its shortcomings, Kertzer’s study is more fully grounded than most others in the relevant archival sources and scholarship.” Since central to Lawler’s “study” was his contention that Kertzer’s work was a travesty of serious scholarship, relying on doctored texts, bogus translations, rigged chronology, etc. it was obvious that Ventresca and Lawler were on a collision course (italics supplied).

This was not altered by Ventresca’s self-supporting observation: “In an early review John Pawlikowski called Kertzer’s book a ‘serious work’ based on ‘sound scholarship,’ which he believed merited the significant attention of Catholics and of all students of the subject.” But even the reference to “shortcomings” appeared to Lawler as another sham gesture of “impartiality,” particularly because Pawlikowski himself, as we shall see, was going to completely reverse himself on the alleged merits of Kertzer’s book.

Similarly, after a few sentences of more or less conciliatory commentary, Ventresca proceeded to indict Lawler for, among other things, engaging in “exploitation for apologetic-polemical ends,” and “sacrificing critical-historical argument for a false argument.” Such failings, the reader was told, “detract from …” [and here we get an odd insight into this critic’s values] “… the professionalism of Lawler’s book.”

The relatively rare statement when Kertzer himself was criticized by Ventresca appeared to be motivated by the opportunity it provided for Ventresca to air his own self-affirmed—and presumably more scholarly and more profound—knowledge of Jews, Judaism, and the modern papacy.

But there is a far more serious problem raised by Ventresca’s invocation of these laudatory opinions of Kertzer’s *The Popes Against the Jews*. The problem is simply that they entirely contradict everything Ventresca had believed about *The Popes Against the Jews* from the time when he *first* read the book with that title. When that was, of course, we do not know precisely; but we do know that about half a dozen years ago, Ventresca severely attacked Kertzer’s work, along with two other anti-papal books. Interestingly, only the latter two are now almost universally condemned for their squalid scholarship and flagrant prejudice, while the book by the Brown University Provost—at least in some quarters—is apparently still to be applauded. If nothing else, this raised the questions of why and when did Ventresca actually cease to disapprove of Kertzer’s work? Or, to put it more simply, when did he join the *Kertzerkreis*?

This is what an apparently less amenable Ventresca had earlier written:

Books such as John Cornwell’s *Hitler’s Pope*, Daniel Goldhagen’s *A Moral Reckoning*, and David Kertzer’s *The Popes Against the Jews* have attracted the attention of historians, journalists, and the public at large, but they are just the tip of
the iceberg. The works of Cornwell, Goldhagen, Kertzer and others tell essentially the same tale: Christianity, and more specifically, institutional Catholicism, has often preached and practiced anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. (emphasis supplied)

What is more, the argument goes, this record of theological, liturgical, and cultural anti-Judaism helped prepare the groundwork for the coming of Nazism. Sadly, arguments against such reductionism and bad scholarship cannot be heard above the din of the mythic version of this particular historical debate.

The din of the myth of Catholicism as preacher and practitioner of anti-Semitism continues to attempt to drown out books like Lawler’s *Were the Popes Against the Jews*, only now it is the mature Ventrescas of this world that are making the most noise. And while Cornwell does get his due when Ventresca describes Hitler’s *Pope as “a specious secret history,”* no mention is made of the fact that Kertzer’s *The Popes Against the Jews* told “essentially the same tale.” That tale, it bears repeating, is that, “Christianity, and more specifically, institutional Catholicism, has often preached and practiced anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.” Moreover, and as also evidenced above, Catholicism’s “record of theological, liturgical, and cultural anti-Judaism helped prepare the groundwork for the coming of Nazism.” Both of these statements and their historical implications are now endorsed repeatedly by Ventresca. In fact they are a central theme invoked over and over in his “War without End: The Popes and the Jews between Polemic and History.” Precisely that is what Ventresca defines as the element of “history” in his article titled, “Review Essay” And by any definition, precisely that is the message of *The Popes Against the Jews*—the book that Ventresca is now enthusiastically applauding. That book hasn’t changed but—a phenomenon that goes entirely unacknowledged—Ventresca’s views of it obviously have.

Those two inset quotations above appeared originally in, “Recovering from the Past, Rediscovering History,” *Logos* (Fall 2005) by Robert A. Ventresca. That particular study in that particular Catholic quarterly was discovered by a scholar, William Doino, who happened to subscribe to *Logos*, and who will play a major role in what is to follow, both because of that discovery, and even more important, because of his discovery of the document describing the wartime audience of Pius XII at which the pope spontaneously praised a young Jewish refugee—all as described in detail in *Were the Popes Against the Jews?*, and all as subject to derision by Ventresca, when he will put on display his own version of academic “professionalism.”

As noted, Ventresca ignominiously ranked *The Popes Against the Jews* with Cornwell’s and Goldhagen’s patently biased screeds. All three authors were accused of precisely the same contemptible practices that Ventresca is now marshalling and deploying in his attack on Lawler. Here, again, is what Ventresca originally condemned as vile propaganda in the works of Cornwell, Goldhagen, and Kertzer:

Christianity, and more specifically, institutional Catholicism, has often preached and practiced anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. What is more, the argument goes, this record of theological, liturgical, and cultural anti-Judaism helped prepare the groundwork for the coming of Nazism.
But that is precisely what Kertzer is now defending and what Lawler has consistently been attacking. So, the question arises what led Ventresca to completely reverse his original position and embrace that of the hitherto contempted Kertzer. It is hard to believe he reread *The Popes Against the Jews* and, suddenly, what he once found revolting he then found seductive.

At this strange juncture, those readers who have been following these issues closely may recall the curious outburst by another Kertzer convert, Rev. Kevin Spicer, when reviewing in *Commonweal* (“Blind Spots,” May 7, 2012) Lawler’s *Were the Popes Against the Jews?* In his closing paragraph, Spicer introduced this curious *non sequitur*, “David Kertzer brought an impressive array of scholars to Brown University,” whom he then proceeded to name, one of them being Robert A. Ventresca. It is difficult not to wonder if it was both men’s visit, to what seems to have assumed the status of a shrine, that was the major factor in their, so to speak, “conversion” to Kertzer’s vision of church and society. There is also the phenomenon—to be examined more fully presently—of both men stridently defending that 2010 conference, and more particularly its host, David Kertzer, even though the conference was centered on Pius XI, the most maligned pontiff in *The Popes Against the Jews*. A reader cannot avoid wondering whether there was something about that conference at that university, an Ivy League institution after all (albeit on the second tier), that led to these radical turn-arounds?

Lastly, in concluding these relatively brief introductory remarks, I would note that their severity is intended to reinforce the fact that these are important issues. We are certainly not debating the equivalent of political controversies having to do with what Gail Collins at the *New York Times* mocked as “the light bulb freedom of choice act.” On the other hand, neither are they as utterly significant as Kertzer’s wholesale assaults on the papacy, or Ventresca’s remedial reading of the latter.

Fortunately, as one works one’s way through “War Without End,” the realization dawns that at its core, this is not primarily an exploration of the relationship of the historical and the polemical in contemporary Catholic studies of the modern papacy and historic Judaism. Nor is it simply a defense of Kertzer against those allegedly appalling accusations made by Lawler. The latent genre or category to which much of this *HTR* article belongs is that of self-exaltation. And hence, the repeated airing not of the views of Kertzer vis-a-vis Lawler or *vice versa*, but of Ventresca’s views on the imaginary book he apparently would have liked to write—and thus (so must go the fantasy) eclipse both of those “failed” predecessors. For that reason his strained effort at criticizing both writers is not—as he sometimes feigns—to balance the scales of justice, but to advance his own agenda. This is also why the tone and the elaborate detail of his declarations are reminiscent of the brainstorming contrivances that gave birth to Norman Mailer’s *Advertisements for Myself*. But rather than suggesting that Ventresca burden himself by reading the cache of random articles that make up that book, I would recommend instead—if only as a curb on his aspirations to self-exaltation—a parody of Mailer’s *Advertisements* published in the UK journal, *Encounter*. (Cf. Justus George Lawler, “The Prisoner of Fat,” January, 1972.) Another
transiently collegial recommendation to Ventresca would be, “Put that in your footnote and stoke it.” That is a recommendation which echoes the one I made to the other Kertzer acolyte (and also Ventresca soul-mate), Rev. Kevin P. Spicer—soon to rejoin these *dramatis personae*.

In light of—or in spite of—all the above, I do remain confident that concerned readers, as they go through Ventresca’s “Review Essay” will conclude that it fails, almost systematically, to negate the detailed and heavily documented thesis regarding David Kertzer and his views on the modern papacy in *Were the Popes Against the Jews?* In fact, if in future decades scholars concern themselves with this relatively minor, “War Without End,” they will be reminded not of “the War of Jenkins’ Ear,” but of “the War of Ventresca’s Eyebrow,” since almost every other statement smacks of superciliousness.

In the immediate present, however, this heavy-handed, hanging-judge “Review Essay” is simply an agglomeration of Ventresca’s opinions on Vatican-Jewish relations as presumably summarized in the recent literature, and conjoined with his interpretation of the views of Lawler as allegedly set forth in his book. Of the latter, the reader is told that it is “a work that is driven by ideological and emotional impulses rather than by the imperatives of critical history.” (Though only three syllables, “critical” is a big word in Ventresca’s lexicon). What holds together this amalgam of “impulses” sans “imperatives” is the pyrotechnically oriented Lawler who “misfires,” uses “inflamed rhetoric,” and makes “thundering accusations”—just like the little Zeus Lawler must secretly aspire to be, as he presumably looks down on the ringing plains of windy Troy—or rather, Ontario—and mutters:

>This dreadful interval determines all;  
>Tomorrow, Troy must flame, or Greece must fall.

Only now Ventresca is no longer firing flaming bolts of thunder, but studying monuments of his own magnificence by becoming a Model Person (MP), as defined by experts Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (no kin to the co-editor of *HTR*) in their classic, *Politeness*. And so, we finally get to the hard data of Ventresca’s pretentious and pretended encyclical, *Papae et Iudei inter litigium et historia*. Here we soon learn that Lawler often goes “well beyond the normal scholarly critique of a respected colleague’s work.” Similarly, Lawler is guilty of failing to abide by “the standards of collegial scholarly confrontation.” I shall have more to say about these garden-party criteria, but for now, I merely want to cut through this myth of deferential academic reciprocity, and point out the guiding principle of *WP AJ*. It is a simple principle that is quoted in both the present book and its predecessor, *Popes and Politics: Reform, Resentment, and the Holocaust*—which Ventresca also has condemned, however “collegially.” That principle originated with John Henry Newman, perhaps the most straight-talking British polemicist of his century: “*Truth is hammered out on the anvil of controversy.*” Lastly, I would emphasize that behind Ventresca’s façade of harmonious mutuality and professorial *politesse* lurking those
rigged arguments and doctored texts that, while busily denouncing, he is at the same time engaged in perpetrating even more abhorrently.

Turning briefly now—and without any transition since this topos isn’t worthy of it—I reintroduce the aforementioned co-editor of *HTR*, Kevin Madigan, a man after Ventresca’s own (now slightly bleeding) heart. Although Madigan did not participate in my exchange with Jon Levenson, he does put in a brief appearance in *WPAJ* (pp. 186-92). Unfortunately for the overblown collegiality lauded above, he is cited there as severely condemning Lawler’s views on David Kertzer, whom he then described as the aforementioned “national treasure.” Nor do I see any reason now why I should have been any less or more critical of Madigan, even though I was aware of his plans for an attack-review on the book long before Ventresca’s encyclical: all as described in an excerpt from Madigan’s CV in the *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin*—presumably a remote country cousin of that pre-eminently distinguished *Harvard Theological Review*.

This is the pertinent passage:


That this is “a piece of work” is a historical observation; that it’s of the genus “nasty” is a hysterical observation.

Moreover, anyone reading Madigan’s public ethical violations cited on pp. 186-92 of *WPAJ* can be quite certain that his review is not forthcoming either in the sense of being imminent or in the sense of being frank and open-minded. What one can say is that his belief in the nastiness of Lawler’s book is based on its criticism of Madigan for his embrace of obvious falsehoods in *Hitler’s Pope*, for his doctoring of a crucial passage in Hubert Wolf’s *Pope and Devil*, and for his simplistic chronological parallels—all as spelt out at the end of chapter eight in the aforementioned and literally “forthcoming,” *WPAJ*. To that end, I gladly invite all Madigan’s students and colleagues to consult this material in order to judge whether it is in fact “nasty.”

On the other hand, if Madigan wants to contest the integrity of any criticism appearing in those or these pages, I am totally open to the challenge—while also noting that it is rather difficult for me to suppress the notion that possibly the co-editors of *HTR* intentionally selected Ventresca because he had displayed precisely the kinds of critical and research traits they were looking for. In the *koine* of the street, he was their “hired gun”—not, of course, that he so acted in order to be paid—or, at least, not to be paid in the coin of the realm. But yes, it was quite certainly to be paid, if only by way of having a couple of dozen pages of pretentious condescension and over-inflated pedantry get published in no less a venue than the *Harvard Theological Review*—that would certainly appear to be an offer so rare and so attractive as to cry out for acceptance. However, if someone is, like Madigan, the co-editor of said review—as well as a tenured professor with an axe to grind—what may be crying out
is Justice herself as well as Justus himself. If Madigan is looking for a replacement for his failed “nasty piece of work,” there is always a more congenial book by Garry Wills, Why Priests? A Failed Tradition, and a more congenial venue, The New York Review of Books.

This segues into another attempt by Ventresca at occupying the high ground—again, by castigating Lawler for his lack of collegiality as well as for his shattering of that mushy conviviality mentioned earlier. Both of those ventures are presumably the social glue—also as noted briefly—that unites all loyal academics in a guild of reciprocal good feeling. In fact, this alleged confraternity of the genteel is merely a reflection of an imaginary mythical era when it was the wont of the professorate to be guardians of bon ton, especially when engaging in “dialogical discourse.” Thus, according to Ventresca: “It simply will not do to suggest that he [Kertzer] has fabricated or doctored evidence in order to prove his point.” It simply will not! But even here Ventresca manages, in the midst of a superabundance of other misreadings, to stumble once again, since Lawler didn’t “suggest” it; he publicly asserted it, and then went on to prove it. This, Lawler will also do with several other pontificating assertions by Ventresca, regardless of how unfitting and unfraternal the latter imagines such things to be.

So, yes, “it behooves those charged with the responsibility of thinking and writing for the sake of truth and understanding” to engage in what Ventresca’s model, Mortimer Adler (he of the famed “great books”), described as “understood disagreement,” whereby criticism of another member of the fellowship is met by—at the most—a raised eyebrow or even a severe frown. Unfortunately, acting poliment only makes sense if the disagreement is not about matters of truth and falsehood, as happened to be the case in the instances I cite in WPAJ of Kertzer’s shocking abuses.

Thus, I have no hesitation about stating now, as I stated then, that it is undeniable that Kertzer doctored significant texts, as did also John Connelly, another historian who appears in WPAJ, and whom Ventresca will also defend. I can say this in good conscience because my commitment is not primarily, or even secondarily, to collegial scholarly anything; it’s to the truth of the matter—the stuff that’s hammered out on Newman’s anvil. As for special treatment for fellow professors, they are no more intrinsically deserving of it than the person who delivers the mail or does brain surgery or runs the country or fixes the car—in fact, probably less so, given the exalted deferential status to which some professional professors are professorially aspiring.

Ventresca’s next gets down to what he apparently views as more serious business. After asserting that Kertzer had “thrown down the gauntlet,” and quoting the phrase from Owen Chadwick that appeared on the jacket of WPAJ to the effect that Kertzer’s book “calls for an answer,” Ventresca continues: “Belatedly, Justus George Lawler has taken up the challenge.”

Apparently this is a deprecatory reference to the period between Popes and Politics: Reform, Resentment, and the Holocaust and WPAJ, a period to be examined shortly—along with that italicized adverb. The next paragraph launches those maledicitions mentioned above describing Lawler and his ancillary attributes: “acerbic,”
“unconvincing,” “thundering accusations,” “misfires badly,” “inflamed rhetorical exercise,” “untenable,” “strains the limits,” etc. “Launched” is the apposite verb here—as when John Henry Newman referred to an allegedly conciliatory overture from a former associate, Edward Bouverie Pusey, as having been “launched from a catapult.”

Concerning this author of the HTR “Review Essay” (the man behind the catapult), there’s apparently not much to be said—other perhaps than: “You’re no E. B. Pusey.” Robert A. Ventresca, is an associate professor at King’s University College, a Catholic affiliate of the state University of Western Ontario. Unfortunately it isn’t clear from the college catalogue whether that name refers to Christ the King or whether it is a spin-off from Kings College in London or Cambridge. However, it does seem safe to speculate that the name is probably not an expression of fellowship with Kings College in Wilkes-Barre. In this same context, it is unfortunate that the catalogue gives no indication of the courses Professor Ventresca teaches, although it seems likely that at least one of them is Remedial Reading, since that’s the academic discipline he is engaged in exercising here.

Ventresca was first introduced into the public discussion of WPAJ by a priest of the Holy Cross congregation, the previously mentioned, Rev. Kevin P. Spicer, in a Commonweal article (“Blind Spots,” May 7, 2012)—an article that at least outdid in excrecations those assembled in the paragraph above on Lawler’s belatedness. In that article, Ventresca himself was among the people described as follows: “David Kertzer brought an impressive array of scholars to Brown University…. Perhaps Justus George Lawler should follow their lead and visit an archive or two before he ventures to write again about this subject.” According to Rev. Spicer, this “subject” was that Lawler, among his many failings, “simply refuses to recognize the depth of complicity of the Catholic Church in the propagation of European anti-Semitism in all its malignant and annihilative forms.” Those final, seemingly redundant, modifiers that I have italicized were intended to drive home the horrors of the particular form of anti-Semitism, to which this edifying clergyperson was accusing Lawler of being sympathetic. However, I am certainly not accusing Ventresca of embracing the slanders that Spicer launched—not at all. Ventresca has his mind on lower things: so do also—as will be shown—other members of the Kertzerkreis, when it comes to fabricating tales about WPAJ and its author.

All of the above opinions were proffered, I hesitate to remind such critics—especially those who may happen to read Commonweal book reviews, again, as Kevin Madigan clearly does—that notwithstanding the public facts that Lawler during the forties and fifties (a period focused on by John Connelly in his From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews), was one of the few Catholics to speak out against American anti-Semitism. He was also one of the first persons to be named a Fellow of the Institute for Judaeo-Christian Studies by John Oesterreicher (the central figure in From Enemy to Brother). As for what might be called the pre-Ventresca period of criticism, beginning with Rev. Spicer and belated associates, it can all be readily accessed at the links below. Moreover, there one can
also read the three independent church historians who, each in his own individual way, and writing in the pages of *U.S. Catholic Historian*, were in fundamental agreement on the overall accuracy of Lawler’s critique of David Kertzer. Of course, one has to assume that these contributors to the symposium on *WPAJ* were just not as learned or as scholarly, or as diligent, or as dedicated—or, some would contend, as self-inflated and ideologically oriented—as Robert A. Ventresca whose single “review essay” is as long as their combined studies (n.b., those studies can be accessed at JustusGeorgeLawler.org).

Ventresca’s name itself may have been recognized by some readers because his recently released book on Pius XII, *Soldier of Christ*, has been getting considerable attention—as well it should. While it was inevitable that some serious writer (and Ventresca is, if nothing else, very serious) would write a work countering “The Deputy” and its sequels, it remained uncertain whether what ensued would be relatively balanced and comprehensive, as well as free of the pedantry and affected superiority that characterizes—to take an example out of the air—*War Without End: The Popes and the Jews between Polemic and History.* I am personally on record as saying of *Soldier of Christ: The Life of Pius XII*, that when contrasted with many of its predecessors, it is in many ways a remarkably balanced and readable work. I am not, however, able to say that the review of the book in the Jesuit magazine *America* by David Kertzer—defamer of popes from Pius IX to Pius XII—was anything less than shameful, and thus intrinsically bad theology and bad journalism. The letter I wrote to the editors went as follows:

*America* has certainly outdone itself by having David I. Kertzer, author of *The Popes Against the Jews*, review the book by his protégé, Robert A. Ventresca. It brings to mind the terms that Kertzer publicly uses to describe his next book, *The Pope and Mussolini*. “The book will show the complex bond—full of moral compromises and backscratching—between Mussolini and the Catholic Church in the years leading up to World War II”

Perhaps as a follow-up, you can excerpt Robert A. Ventresca’s other balancing act, the one in *Harvard Theological Review*, when he attempts to defend David I. Kertzer against the detailed accusations appearing in the book, *Were the Popes Against the Jews*?

Moreover, I would point to a serious flaw the Pius XII book shares with “War Without End.” In the latter, as any reader will readily see, the intentionally projected image is that of an encyclopedic authority who, though an admirer of Kertzer, affects total neutrality. Unfortunately, when discussing matters to which Ventresca is clearly unsympathetic (*e.g.*, the aforementioned and over-mentioned “Justus George Lawler”) that façade crumbles. As presaged briefly above, Ventresca introduced the following (italicized) adverb early in his twenty-five page “review essay”: “Belatedly, Justus George Lawler has taken up the challenge of Kertzer’s *The Popes against the Jews* in his new book *Were the Popes Against the Jews*?… He answers the question from the start with a resounding ‘of course they were.’” This observa-
tion has a footnote which is attuned to resonate with that condescending pejorative, “belatedly.” “Lawler’s *Were the Pope’s Against the Jews?* follows his roving polemic *Popes and Politics: Reform, Resentment, and the Holocaust*” (emphasis added). This is the kind of deprecatory remark, intended to slur the book and denigrate Lawler, that was referred to earlier—and at which Ventresca is proving himself to be a past master. Unfortunately, his choice of that last named book—as one versifying colleague noted—simply illustrates that if it’s the little foxes that spoil the vine, it’s the little minds that are most malign.

Ventresca’s attempt to trivialize *Popes and Politics* as a “roving polemic”—however the latter might be defined in his lexicon—falls flat for two reasons: the first is that it undercuts his own professed deferential admiration for *The Popes Against the Jews* by ignoring or implicitly denying the unavoidable fact that Lawler’s *Popes and Politics* had expressed appreciation, however narrowly focused and qualified, for Kertzer’s work as it related to the exclusion of post-conciliar pontiffs from his indictment of “popes against the Jews.” This was particularly noteworthy because *Popes and Politics* appeared at a time when Paul VI and John Paul II were being attacked by two of Kertzer’s most enthusiastic admirers, James Carroll and Garry Wills, in a campaign which went on for over a decade, and which was finally laid to rest with the following obituary, described in *Popes and Politics* as “Pseudo Victorian doggerel”—possibly written by that versifier mentioned above.

Wills the journalistic sleuth
Discovers popes don’t tell the truth.
In *Constantine* Carroll cries
Theology’s a pack of lies.

Such statements how can we combine?
This perhaps explains the mystery:
Wills thinks Carroll a divine,
And Carroll looks to Wills for history.

Here *Popes and Politics* displayed Lawler’s integrity by his approval of those passages, however extremely rare, where Kertzer’s *The Popes Against the Jews* happened to be on the side of real history relative to a much debated issue.

The next and far more important reason for correcting Ventresca’s facile dismissal of *Popes and Politics*—a book whose contents and context he simply rejects—is that it achieves the very goal for which Ventresca himself is calling. In the first of his condescendingly omniscient critiques of *WP AJ*—and deploying all available latinate jargon—he advocates these desiderata:

[first] “What is needed is a properly critical-historical approach to *this complicated issue*, one that is framed by an analytical framework capable of explaining adequately the complex dynamic at work in Jewish-Catholic relations in diverse cultural, social and geo-political contexts over time. [second] Above all, what is needed is an approach to the modern history of the popes and the Jews that is
intentionally divested of the unstated but powerful ideological agendas and emotional attachments that have, to date, produced both overly deterministic arguments of papal complicity on the one hand and polemical apologias on the other.”

(emphasis added)

Since “polemical apologias” are now precisely what Ventresca is engaging in, the only response to this is either “magician heal thyself” or “shrieve me, shrieve me, holy man.” But, in fact, anyone abstracting from the pompous cant above will find that those very goals, however latent, were surveyed in John Jay Hughes’s balanced review of *Popes and Politics* (*America*, July 15, 2002). Those goals are even more evident in this same authority’s review of *Were the Popes Against the Jews* (*Inside the Vatican*, June-July, 2012).

Similarly, concerning that first “need” highlighted above, there is the plain fact that Léon Poliakov’s four volumes—in the masterly series of works, subsequently titled, *The History of Anti-Semitism*—are as effective a response to “this complicated issue” as one is likely to get. Likewise, there is *Harvest of Hate*, his sequel to the last volume, that may be said to correspond to that second highlighted “need.” Poliakov is cited throughout *WP AJ*, but nowhere more effectively than in regard to the “ritual murder” trial in Kiev, a trial of which I don’t hesitate to state that, while Kertzer is duplicitous in his approach to it, his protégé, Ventresca, *doesn’t have the least idea of what is at issue*. (Of that, more in due time.) But the reader soon learns that, in fact, Ventresca isn’t really interested in these alleged historical desiderata; he is interested in elaborating his polemic against *WP AJ*—all the while scanning the horizon for additional *topoi* to lend a little yeast to his flat mix of Kertzer vis-à-vis Lawler.

Ventresca’s oh-so-solemn “complicated issue” came to mind when I noticed that the week when the *Harvard Theological Review* appeared, *Vanity Fair* came out with its lead article titled, “Of Moose and Men,” on the absence of a sense of humane wit in our Northern neighbors, who *sometimes*—certainly in the instance of Ventresca—do seem framed by an analytical framework that pinches their sense of intellectual balance. Perhaps the present response to Ventresca’s elaborate guilty-as-charged assault (the “hanging judge” mentioned earlier) on Lawler and his book should be titled, “Of Noose and Men.” For the present, I will merely note that Ventresca’s critique relies on a very lengthy and, presumably, very thoroughly researched and exhaustively annotated description of where Lawler’s book just plain gets it all wrong. This scholarly critique is then followed by Ventresca himself supplying in the rest of his review a very thoroughly researched and exhaustively annotated text which constitutes, for him, the completely rectified, remedied, and redressed version—a version, which in fact *does* just plain get it all wrong.

In sum, after the framework has been framed by this framer, he advocates, “the divestment of powerful ideological agendas and emotional attachments” as well as the rejection of “overly deterministic arguments of papal complicity on the one hand and polemical apologias on the other.” But what the *HTR* critic apparently does not notice is that the above “approach” had already been embraced and put into effect in
a work that Ventresca had already—and not surprisingly—rejected tout court. I refer again to Popes and Politics: Reform, Resentment, and the Holocaust, a work that, while free of any ideological agenda, does embrace the concept of emotional attachment to one’s religious tradition and to its ongoing renewal.

Perhaps a touch of paroxysmal positional vertigo was responsible for Ventresca’s singularly odd dismissal of that book as a “roving polemic.” Maybe “red rover” was weighing on his mind, since that children’s game does have pagan roots which a conscientious religious scholar like Ventresca could hardly let come to flower. In any case, crucial sections of Popes and Politics were cited over a dozen times in Were the Popes Against the Jews, as Ventresca could not help noticing—had he actually read that earlier work.

Moreover, there are open-minded and dedicated scholars out there, albeit in a universe which transcends that framed by this framer of frameworks (as well as of people) and who apparently is so preoccupied with the mystique of polemic vis-à-vis history that he manages to ignore the latter altogether. One of those dedicated scholars is Rabbi Jacob Neusner who, unlike our self-framed critic, actually read Popes and Politics, and in an act of spontaneous generosity took it upon himself to review. Nor was this in some remote and rarefied academic journal—to go unnamed here—but in the most widely read news venue in the world of Judaism, The Jerusalem Post (“Warts on the Body of Christ,” August 30, 2002). Since I will include Rabbi Neusner’s entire review in the appendix I proffer here only the first column of his statement. That section, highlighted below, might well be thought of as a kind of catena aurea—in this case, a chain to hoist Ventresca and his emulators out of their constricting frameworks. The entire review may also be read as a response to the excerpt above—setting forth Ventresca’s opinion of “what is needed”—as well as to his earlier demeaning observation that what Lawler has written is an “apologia of papal thought and action vis-à-vis Jews and Judaism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (emphasis supplied).

Here is how Neusner began his treatment of Popes and Politics—where, among other items, one might note the italicized term, “apologia.”

To understand the focus of this profound and original meditation on the interplay of theological conviction and political reality we have to ignore the allusion to the Holocaust in the title.

That is not because Justus George Lawler, an experienced voice in Catholic theology and philosophy of religion for a generation, does not deal with the intense debate on Pius XII and on what the Roman Catholic Church did, should have done, failed to do, or should never have done, in that catastrophe of European civilization.

Nor is it to suggest that Lawler intends either an indictment or an apologia for the institution that calls itself “the body of Christ.” It is because Lawler has sought successfully, in my view to place the acutely contemporary debate into the more profound context of the on-going struggle for reformation and renewal in Roman Catholic Christianity.
What makes Lawler’s book intensely interesting is his framing of contemporary issues in their historical and cultural context.

One cannot help but think: “So much for Ventresca’s framing framework on *Popes and Politics*, and so much, too, for his fabrication of Lawler’s apologias.

The next issues that must be confronted are Ventresca’s animadversions on the document, “We Remember,” by the papal Commission on Jewish relations. These allow him to introduce some more of his remarkably mild criticism of Kertzer, and thus to put on display the fiction of his “impartiality.” Moreover, there is nothing new about disclosing the obvious weaknesses of that document; and since I am also critical of it, there is little more to be said about its conclusion other than that “the distinction between racist anti-Semitism and religious anti-Jewishness remains essential”—though it is certainly not the “article of faith” that Kertzer describes it as being. Nor is it to be taken ad literam as some kind of absolute. Thus when Ventresca points out that Lawler “largely ignores” the fact that “some fundamental lines of continuity” were discernible between religious anti-Judaism and modern anti-Semitism,” I would point again to his waffling language, and observe that “largely ignores” means he “does not ignore”; and that “some lines of continuity” however “fundamental,” doesn’t mean “no continuity” of any kind at all. Otherwise I would never have published an important study on precisely these matters in *Continuum* (Vol. II, no. 3, 1993), “Antisemitism as Ally: Campaigning Against Masonry and Modernism,” by C.J.T. Talar, a serious scholar who was also one of the symposiasts who—unlike Ventresca—actually read and analyzed *WPAJ*. Lastly, I don’t know of anyone who affirmed that some fundamental lines of continuity were non-existent except perhaps the younger Ventresca writing in *Logos*, and perhaps taking his undeniably accurate position just a fraction toward the extreme.

Ventresca’s next section is headed, “Were the Popes against the Jews? The Case Awaiting an Answer.” I wasn’t sure just what “case” this might refer to, but it soon became clear that, in fact, it’s the case in which Ventresca stores the material he’s going to use when he assumes the role of “doctor.” Thus it is no surprise that he continued by asserting that, “Lawler argues, from the late nineteenth century to the end of World War II, successive popes actually were very much for the Jews and were moving the church inexorably towards the epochal transformations in Catholic-Jewish relations signaled by the Second Vatican Council” (emphases supplied).

Needless to say, Lawler argued nothing about those popes doing those exaggerated things, although he does argue that views on Jews and Judaism were gradually and visibly improving during that half a century period. The first highlighted passage above is sheer hyperbole fabricated by Ventresca. *Mais peu importe*, as they say north of the border, since anybody would get a little distracted when engaged in the elaborate textual doctoring Ventresca brings to bear on those two highlighted phrases. Of the second, the reader is told in effect that this line of popes, even those in extremis like Leo XIII or inexperienced like Benedict XV, were all moving the church inexorably (though inexplicably) in the direction of Vatican II. Needless to say, Ventresca doesn’t
elaborate *in extenso* on these extraordinary phenomena relative to what it is that “Lawler argues,” because … because it’s not part of his “inflamed rhetorical exercise.”

But certainly, even more disconnected from any sense of reality is the sentence immediately following those inexplicable observations regarding those successive popes. “On the face of it, this [i.e., popes “moving the church inexorably” toward the Council] is a *tenuous hypothesis at best* …” (This is one of those periodic and arbitrary comments intended to prove that, after all, Ventresca is not in fact totally ill-disposed to Lawler’s views.) Unfortunately, not only is this hypothesis tenuous at best, or at worst, or at any place in between, it is a hypothesis that Lawler never proposed, advocated, or defended. That makes even more off-target Ventresca’s next shot: “… but to the book’s great disservice, Lawler gets derailed from a serious exploration of the [“tenuous”] idea by focusing almost all of his attention on refuting David Kertzer’s *work*” (emphasis supplied). *This*, we are to believe is a disservice to a book titled, *Were the Popes Against the Jews?*

First, I won’t even reflect, much less expatiate on the use here of the word “derail”—unless it’s an unwitting commendation for avoiding the third rail of traducement where Ventresca is now positioning himself. Second, I would make note of the fact that the aforementioned “tenuous hypothesis” was born of the fruitful imagination of this same HTR narrator, explicator, doctorer, etc, who is now composing an “essay review” of *Were the Popes Against the Jews?*

Thus, I do feel a certain sense of obligation to point out, more or less in abecedarian fashion, that *this book’s title* is directly related to David Kertzer’s work. Even though I must admit to lacking those “judicious, informed, and nuanced modes of analysis that are the hallmark of historical thinking and writing,” I can admit this because whenever Ventresca exercises those desired modes, they become the skeletons of their original selves. I do try with all my heart, as it were, to take a “properly historical-critical approach” to what is pretty evident even to an ahistorically oriented person like myself. *C’est à dire—as* they also say up North—everything from the book’s jacket to its contents explicitly refers to David Kertzer’s work. *That* is the *raison d’être* of its title and of the whole undertaking. It is also made very clear in the introduction, and in every chapter of the book itself—though I must confess to omitting any reference to David Kertzer’s *work* in the “Acknowledgments.” (Maybe something can be squeezed into the second edition—which will undoubtedly be demanded by the public, especially once they have heard about it in no less celebrated a medium than *The Harvard Theological Review*.)

Having out of necessity reduced the discussion above to the level of learning one’s ABCs, it seems not unfitting to emulate here that same kind of simplistic reductionism. Thus I observe that, in the reprimand excerpted below of the author of *WPAJ*, Ventresca waxes poetic; although unfortunately he over waxes, and so slips up when he badly (and baldly) mixes his metaphors (something literary critics abhor). His prosaic beginning—in the quotation below—is somewhat acceptable, but his alliterative “insinuation / insult” trope turns out to be just a wee bit too self-conscious. Even more to be regretted, immediately following that alliteration this poetic mix master blends
everything together to produce the extended simile of a verbal tsunami (italicized below) which doesn’t even have a lighthouse left standing to guide us through the resultant “conjectural calumnies”—or, maybe that should be “calamities.” However, all’s not lost; as we do end up (highlighted below) in the hands of a group of Mitreisenden led by a person who is—at least nominally—a well-meaning heretic. (“Better,” I always say, “than a heathen.”)

That poetry-professor fatuousness is intended to mute—or better, extinguish—the pompous arrogance of Ventresca’s condescending reprimand below. It is to be borne in mind that what he is talking about here is the major figure in WP AJ, i.e., David Kertzer.

It is especially unfortunate that Lawler should think it appropriate to engage in ad hominem insinuation bordering on insult. Like the centrifugal waves of an after-shock, these personal attacks radiate further and further outward and away from the epicenter of the original quake. No one is safe from Lawler’s piercing glare; no shelter is refuge enough from his weighty accusations of professional incompetence or of collusion with the so-called “conjectural calumnies” of David Kertzer and his fellow travelers.

It was in the light of this obvious but unfortunate waning of Ventresca’s dramatic skills that I gave some thought to possibly sending him, if only as a gesture of Quaker solidarity, an autographed copy of Celestial Pantomime: Poetic Structures of Transcendence. The Yale edition of 1979 is prettier; but the “new expanded edition” of 1994 is considerably more helpful, particularly for someone afflicted by mixed metaphors and alienating alliterations. But then it occurred to me that given the earth-shattering aftershocks to which his creative imagination had been subjected, what perhaps Ventresca really needed was a re-tuning of his mental seismograph.

Following that decision, and subsequent to the splash of imagery above, Ventresca then proffered this concrete but, unfortunately, very prosaic example of the consequences of the aforementioned quake, tsunami, etc.

Representative in this regard is Lawler’s wholly imaginary conjecture that the 2010 conference that David Kertzer helped to organize and host at Brown University was comprised of so many like-minded automatons—“homo academicus”—with their “mute acquiescence” to the established orthodoxy enforced by the inquisitor-cum-provost of Brown University. Lawler has misfired badly by imputing such motives to the conference organizers and participants from Europe and North America.

That was the second time Lawler had “misfired,” so it was clearly time to get very serious—or maybe, to join the NRA, an organization not to be confused with the “old normal” known as National Recovery Act or No Relief Anywhere. But fortunately, by this phase of target practice, the credibility of homo-academicus-Ventresca was itself being so seriously called into question that his views on theology seemed about as cogent and relevant as the Tea Party’s views on politics.
Even more remarkable—and here I digress from that 2010 conference to a more serious treatment of what is now called “backstory”—is that Ventresca’s views on politics are those of the Tea Party. This seems like an unbelievable accusation to make of a Canadian historian who appears to be mainly devoted to the study of the papacy during the period, approximately, from the first to the second Vatican Council. Nevertheless, he has made the following condemnation of “Catholics in public life” who have adopted something called, “secularist orthodoxy.” Nor apparently are these Catholics negligible eccentrics or few in number. In fact, quite the contrary, as the reader is told that, “examples abounded: House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Vice-President Joe Biden, and Senator John Kerry. And don’t forget the Kennedys.” No, this is not Bill O’Reilly inveighing against “San Francisco values”; this is Professor Robert Ventresca writing in Canada’s The National Post. (“Secularist Orthodoxy Run Amok,” June 4, 2010), on public figures with the wrong beliefs about “the major moral issues of our time.” Interestingly, the first of those major moral issues that cried out for condemnation was, “blessing same-sex marriage.”

Coincidentally, even as I was writing this material (February 20, 2013), there was a full-page, full-color ad in The New York Times in which the following obvious partisans of “secularist orthodoxy” were personally engaged in [how can this be true!] nothing other than blessing same-sex marriage. The headline read: “Bipartisan leaders support the Freedom to Marry.” This time, examples superabound: Laura Bush, “When couples are committed to each other and love each other then they ought to have the same sort of rights that everyone has.” Dick Cheney, “Freedom means freedom for everyone.” Colin Powell, “They should be able to get married…. It seems to me this is the way we should be moving in this country.” And one must not forget Barack Obama, that secularist orthodox president who, single handedly, makes this coalition “bipartisan” with the following observation: “Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law.” So much for another insight into the mental, moral, political, and theological Sitz im Leben of Robert Ventresca.

As for that briefly bypassed Brown University conference, it took place on October 29-30, under the curiously designated title, “Pius XI and America: An International Conference”—curious, because probably the last things one might imagine in conjunction were that pope and this continent. And, yes, it was indeed hosted by the Brown University Provost, whose hosting was deeply appreciated by the religious scholars in attendance, as witness the testimony earlier of Rev. Spicer along with that of Messrs. Madigan and Ventresca.

Presumably, they all must have learned at that International Conference that their host had been working for several years on a book titled The Pope and Mussolini—a conjunction only a little less incongruous that that of the aforementioned International Conference on the Pope and America. And thereby hangs a sale—which is in the hands of Random House where the Provost’s manuscript is scheduled for receipt by September of this year, and for publication in June, 2014. That date differs by six months from what Kertzer’s message to Lawler (cf. WPAJ, pp. 234-36) had earlier
indicated. But of more significance was the difference in the publisher’s (and thus, Kertzer’s) new description of the book itself.

The book will show the complex bond—full of moral compromises and backscratching—between Mussolini and the Catholic Church in the years leading up to World War II…. here readers will discover, for the first time, the crucial role the Catholic Church played in the rise of fascism in Italy, fueled in part by the fear of fascism but even more by the pope’s conservative views.

The puffery is conventional, but the older description—which was deliciously ridiculous—made the book a portrayal of “the co-dependent relationship between Pius XI and Mussolini from 1922 to 1939, revealing for the first time how each man relied on the other to consolidate his power and pursue his political goals.” Ventresca can pass on to his mentor, Provost Kertzer, my congratulations at getting rid of that mutual-addiction jargon about co-dependent relationships. That is the sort of thing that is very likely to raise questions about the existence of some kind of weird organization perhaps called, “Fascists Anonymous.” Unfortunately, the new question that must come to mind is whether—and even more important, how—did the eponymous Papa and Duce engage in the reciprocal backscratching mentioned both above and in my letter to the editors at America (reproduced on page 9 above).

Finally, there is the more serious fact—as Lawler’s levity languishes—that any open-minded readers will have already glimpsed: the fact that what had manifestly vexed Lawler himself was the deeply distressing phenomenon of so many Catholic scholars attending an affair organized by the man who had said Pius XI held “stri-dently anti-Semitic views.” This was also the man who had launched the following falsehoods:

Although Jews in many parts of Poland were being murdered, their homes and synagogues burned to the ground, and the Pope himself had asked him to take an interest in the Jews’ welfare, Ratti did nothing of the sort. Examination of his activities in the months that followed reveals that, on the contrary, he did everything he could to impede any Vatican action on behalf of the Jews and prevent any Vatican intervention that would discourage the violence. (emphases supplied)

Apart from the entirely arbitrary accusation highlighted above, there is the additional matter of the underlined passage which necessarily opens this discussion to one of the most fraudulent ruses in the whole of Kertzer’s armamentarium: the juggling of chronology. In fact, only the latter is comparable in gravity to his duplicity regarding the ritual murder trial in Kiev, where the pope allegedly refused to intervene and save the life of the accused Jew.

Concerning those underlined “months that followed,” the judgment entailed does not exceed such rudimentary mathematical skills as addition and subtraction. The hard fact that remains regarding those months was that they are nonexistent, as Kertzer again—and far more significantly—doctored the record. The complete span
of time for which Kertzer provided any documentation went from the date of the Pope’s request to take an interest in the welfare of the Jews, December 22, 1918 to the date of Ratti’s last cited report to Rome (January 15, 1919). It must come as a shock to any readers seeking to make sense out of this chronology that those “months” were less than four weeks. But even more shocking is the fact that all of the recorded communications between Ratti and Rome—which are what Kertzer relies on to determine why Ratti’s “experience in Poland takes on such enormous importance”—occurred during a period of less than half a year from the time when “the Vatican librarian” came to Poland in June 1918, and up to that last recorded report of January, 1919.

This bears repeating. There is no chronological documentation of anything that relates to the other approximately thirty-two months in Poland. So, not only are “the months that followed” Gasparri’s request, in fact only three weeks; but the aggregate of all the reports and communications with Rome during the momentous “three years in Warsaw” relate only to approximately a seventh of the total time Ratti was actually there. Yet Kertzer has insisted, without of course spelling out the details, that this period—absurdly abridged—provides “priceless” and “precious” insights that “allow us, for the first time, to understand the attitude toward the Jews that Ratti brought with him when he became pontiff.” To drive home this absurdity Kertzer then refers to the future pope’s “three eventful years” in Poland. How he knows this, how he dares to say this: that he never explains; neither is it explained by his legion of devoted acolytes, including Robert Ventresca.

Parenthetically, it may be noted that this condensed chronology may explain the language of John Cornwell’s vigorous endorsement of The Popes Against the Jews: “Once again Kertzer has produced impressive evidence of the part played by the papacy in the growth of anti-Semitism.” The evidence is as impressive as that marshaled by Cornwell to validate his own heralded discovery that Ratti’s successor, Pacelli, was really the pawn of the Führer, and thus deserved the appellation, “Hitler’s pope.” Cornwell claimed that he had worked in the Vatican archives for “months on end.” Unfortunately, the official archival records showed that he was there “from May 12 to June 2 1997,” a period which it would be generous to describe as days on end. All of the above also explains why, after I mentioned the Brown University “International Conference” in the book’s Introduction (p. xi), the details of the affair were discussed only after over two hundred pages of exposing and critiquing Kertzer’s stratagems, rigged arguments, and doctored texts. Nevertheless, as an effort toward moving on, I willingly concede to Ventresca that it must have been “a model conference in every respect, punctuated by the gracious hospitality of the organizers and of the host institution.” Both of those two categories are in fact pretty much the same, since it was Kertzer who was the principal organizer as well as the principal host at the institution where he exercised his provostship role.

Thus, I very willingly leave the entire matter there—although Ventresca will not, as he now “punctuates” his own imagery of earthquakes with an arbitrary outburst of language—hard as this is to believe—evocative of the old ballgame chant about
buying “some peanuts and crackerjack”—which I willingly would do, if it would placate this critic who suddenly appears to be something of a hungry jock. Although he has been grandstanding while wandering around somewhere on the epicenter, he launches this oddly unanticipated (and certainly almost inconceivable) bit of imagery.

Lawler’s tangential harangue, which comes in the opening pages no less, is a most inauspicious start to a loosely organized and discursive book whose raison d’être presumably is to set the record straight. Strike one, let us say. Troublingly, his swings and misses continue apace as the author moves polemically from one ad hominem attack to another. (emphasis supplied)

Yes, indeed, let’s all shout, “strike one!”
As Ventresca whiffs his ad hominem run.

But our Canadian swinger is a persistent goof
As whiff follows whiff and poof follows poof.

Close by our sturdy batsman, the last ball unheeded sped.
“That ain’t my style,” Ventresca says. “Your out!” the umpire said.

In my own vulgar part of the world—far from the whiffenpoof locale where Ventresca along with “Louie dwells”—and, recalling as a teenager skipping school with a couple of other truants to take in a ball game no less, I am now struck by the recollection that each shirtless old guy shouting in the bleachers at Wrigley Field was literally a tan gent. So, maybe, could it be? No it’s not possible. But, hey! youthful susceptibility and all that…. So maybe it was that experience which led me to embrace the rhetorical art form, now known as the tangential harangue. As those other Canadians, somewhat to the east of King’s College, are wont to say: “Autre temps, autre moeurs.” Lastly, I would add, if the immediately preceding paragraphs seem to have an air of disdainful trivialization regarding Ventresca—it’s because they are intended to function in precisely that fashion.

Unfortunately, batsman Bob is a veritable font of disapprobation—as he registers a new complaint. “So it is that reviewers who dared to offer so-called ‘glowing comments’ on Kertzer’s 2001 work are derided collectively [by Lawler] as ‘a combination of genteel irenicists and kindly reformists’” (italics supplied). Even though, he is only in a so-so mood, whatever it is that Ventresca’s pitching now, it is surprisingly wide of the plate. Those “so-called ‘glowing comments’” were so called by none other than David Kertzer himself, in one of his not infrequent first-person encomia. But if Ventresca really thinks “genteel” and “kindly” are adjectives that deride, it’s entirely understandable why he would think “irenicist” and “reformist” were also terms of derision. (Maybe along with his Remedial Reading exercises, he can brush up on his Classical Languages.)

Ventresca then quotes one of those discerning readers who “can readily appreciate that, despite its shortcomings, Kertzer’s study is more fully grounded than most
others in the relevant archival sources and scholarship.” Those cautionary qualifications—"despite its shortcomings,” and “more fully grounded than most others”—represent Ventresca’s post-Lawler preoccupation at the prospect of simply whiffing again. And that is precisely what he clearly does in this next sentence when introducing that aforementioned discerning reader, the Rev. John Pawlikowski. “In a 2001 review of Kertzer’s book, Pawlikowski had referred to it as a ‘serious work based on sound scholarship,’ which he believed merited the ‘significant attention of Catholics and of all students of the subject.’”

Unfortunately, regarding those accolades, Father Pawlikowski has since retracted them entirely, and now professes to have said nothing whatever that was favorable to Kertzer’s book and/or its author. In Pawlikowski’s own review of Lawler’s WP AJ (Journal for the Study of Antisemitism, June 13, 2012), he weaseled out of his earlier laudatory remarks, and in fact boasted that at a conference “several years ago,” he “took on Kertzer publicly” about the latter’s “negative comments on the Vatican document … ‘We Remember.’” Unfortunately, there is no indication in Pawlikowski’s review that Kertzer himself was present for the “take-on.” In any case, these remembrances of things past continue: “So I have always maintained a critical posture toward Kertzer’s interpretations—as have most, if not all, of the circle of scholars with whom I have partnered over the years.”

So much for Ventresca’s discovery of endorsements for Kertzer’s “sound scholarship,” and so much, also, for “partner” Kevin Spicer and his soon-to-be-rescinded membership in Pawlikowski’s circle of scholars. Since Spicer slandered Lawler in the name of Kertzer, he will just have to pay the price of banishment. Perhaps Spicer will also have to embrace his own Commonweal advice to “Justus George Lawler.” That advice was that he should “follow their lead and visit an archive or two before he ventures to write again about this subject.” That italicized pronoun “their” refers to Giuliana Chamedes and Charles Gallagher, estimable scholars both; as well as to (surprise!) “Robert Ventresca of Canada’s University of Western Ontario”—all of whose leads JGL is busily following. For anyone who might be interested, Pawlikowski’s review and its consequences are considered in greater detail in U.S. Catholic Historian—which, as noted earlier, can be accessed at the aforementioned Lawler website. (Father Pawlikowski will also put in a final appearance when the curtain falls on this entire spectacle.)

However, having whiffed again, Ventresca now abandons all baseball imagery—only to take up another form of entertainment, that of the more or less classic “Minstrel Show.” In another reprimand of Lawler, he warns: “Such patronizing treatment of one’s interlocutors reveals that, despite the inflated claim to be ‘confronting the ideologues,’ this book has an ‘ideological fixation’ of its own.” To this, the semi-classical riff begins as follows: “You all is entirely right, and I’ll fix it right away,” says Julius Sneezer to Mr. Interlocutor—who continues with this revelatory non sequitur.

In fact, despite his pretenses to unmask an unholy trinity of “factual errors, mistranslations, and faulty arguments,” Lawler himself is guilty of interpretative and
methodological slips and leaps of logic in the service of his own obvious agenda. Consequently, the book is replete with its own generous doses of selectively parsed sources, wishful translations, contorted arguments, and forced inferences. (emphasis supplied)

After his rejection of Nicene orthodoxy, Ventresca introduces his readers to those final four—basketball apparently having replaced vaudeville—“generous doses” which Lawler is guilty of doling out. Ventresca then continues with what he himself describes as, “one illustrative example.” Unexplained is how those four different violations can be exemplified by one illustration. But certainly, even more self-contradictory is the fact that this single example embodies what Ventresca himself had just denounced as “wishful,” “contorted,” and “forced.”

Lawler attempts to attribute to Pius XII a wartime declaration on behalf of persecuted Jews and other civilians. The speech was an Easter radio address by Pius XII on 13 April 1941. Lawler says, correctly [sic], that the pope decried the situation of the “defenseless, the sick, and the aged.” Lawler stretches the argument, though, when he spins this address to infer that the pope referred explicitly to Jews, along with Catholics and Protestants, as being “very dear” to his heart.” (emphasis supplied)

How anyone can “spin” a statement in order to “infer” that in the same statement someone else “referred explicitly” to X, Y, or Z—that is logically, grammatically, and mathematically impossible. Nor did Lawler “spin” anything. What Lawler himself had actually written is the following:

In the Easter message of 1941, the pope referred to the war as “atrocious,” and he lamented the conditions of “the defenseless, the sick, and the aged,” adding that “very dear” to him were Catholics, Protestants, and Jews: “children of the Church of Christ, others with faith in the Divine Savior, or in Our Father who is in Heaven.”

That is the complete statement. It was certainly not an attempt “to attribute to Pius XII a wartime declaration on behalf of persecuted Jews and other civilians.” Most people when reading what the pope said would think it to be a compassionate utterance, particularly given the times and the circumstances. But then elaborating on his own distortion (of what can be clearly read in the book) and ignoring the quotation marks in the excerpted passage above, Ventresca—picking at nits—claims of the doctored text: “It forces, or rather misconstrues, the inference to say that this oblique comment about those who share the church’s faith in God amounts to a public expression of solidarity for persecuted Jews.”

Unfortunately, for the case being made by Ventresca, Lawler never claimed that these words of Pius XII “amounted” to anything like that. Thus there was no need for Ventresca’s even more pretentious and arbitrary admonition that, “we should not con-
strue them to be authoritative papal defenses of persecuted Jews facing violent, systematic repression.” Since Lawler didn’t so “construe” them, we are facing once again the kind of doctored material in which Ventresca so facilely and so frequently traffics. In fact, throughout this entire critique, any time there is a paraphrase of one of Lawler’s statements, the original is either misquoted or warped. Most readers of this will recall the earlier Ventresca travesty relative to all modern popes allegedly being, “very much for the Jews,” and “moving the church inexorably” toward Vatican II—when the only point at issue was that the Church’s “views on Jews and Judaism were gradually and visibly improving.”

The obvious contradictions above, then lead into what is presumed to be another instance of Lawler’s embrace of the emblematic and dependence on the deceptive—but which, in fact, will again put on display the arrogance of Ventresca and his polemically motivated opinion. This time we are concerned with William Doino, the researcher introduced earlier, who had disclosed the article in Logos where Ventresca himself linked his present-day model, David Kertzer and his book, The Popes Against the Jews, with the works of John Cornwell and Daniel Goldhagen.

In the context of that disclosure—as the reader may recall—I described Doino as the discoverer of a more important document, one that described a wartime audience of Pius XII with a young Jewish refugee whom Pius had affirmed with the words: “Never forget, you must always be proud to be a Jew.” I then added this observation: “… all as described in detail in Were the Popes Against the Jews and all as subject to much verbal derision by Ventresca when he will put on display his own version of academic professionalism.” That display began with an allusion to the “oblique comment” which Lawler allegedly misconstrued in Pius XII’s Easter Message of 1941. “The same must be said about a familiar wartime account which Lawler unconvincingly invests with an evidentiary and historical import beyond its worth.” (italics supplied)

Moreover, the quotation about near-worthless evidentiary import continues with this garbled assertion. “Lawler recounts the story, as reported in The Palestine Post in 1944, of a Jewish refugee who met with Pius XII before making his way to Palestine….” It is intentionally misleading to describe this event as if one of the newspaper’s journalists simply “reported” it, since in fact it was the editors who presented it as dramatic first-hand testimony by the principal witness himself. Any alternative to that reading suggests that the words of the pope were fabrications and that The Palestine Post’s editors were duped into publishing them. That, of course, is precisely how Ventresca wants this narrative to be read.

And therein lurks another bit of Ventrescan snarkiness. At no place in the description of this allegedly “familiar” wartime account is William Doino, its discoverer, mentioned—even though he is cited numerous times in WP AJ. In fact, where one would instinctively expect his name to appear, the appended footnote’s attribution is to another person entirely, the British historian, Michael Burleigh—who must find all this something of a surprise. Such a strange and inexplicable omission suggests on the part of Ventresca, not so much a mood of animosity but of superstition—a more wor-
risome mental disorder—as if the ancient nomen-omen equation were literally true, and to mention Doino would bring down the wrath of the gods.

But in point of fact—if facts are admissible in this particular discussion—the real wartime account of Doino’s discovery was completely unfamiliar to almost all Anglophone Catholics—not to mention, almost all Catholics anywhere, save for people who followed Doino’s work, or who read about it in WPAJ. Needless to say, the latter includes people like Ventresca who never knew of it until he read about it there. Moreover, the purpose of much of Lawler’s extensive treatment of this account was that such ignorance was often ideologically motivated and intentional, particularly among people who, for various reasons, persisted in vigorously proclaiming that Pius XII was responsible for the failure of church, churchmen, and churchgoers to oppose the Nazi persecution of Jews. Since it was public knowledge that he was obviously indifferent to their fate, so went (and still goes) the argument, he could not have uttered the words of support addressed to the young Jewish refugee. In short, the entire narrative is bogus. What this says about the open-minded pursuit of truth, and about the scholarly use of “critical historical” methods—that can be left to the professional practitioners of those disciplines.

As for Doino’s even more extensive treatment of this account, it is important to note that he has closely traced the career of the Jewish refugee, Heinz Wisla (1920-2004), from its early years when his father used his influence as a decorated veteran of the Great War to have his anti-Nazi son freed from Sachsenhausen. Wisla subsequently managed to join a group of 500 other refugees on an old cattle boat presumably destined for Palestine, but in fact fated to founder on an abandoned island in the Aegean. There they were captured by Italian troops and imprisoned on the isle of Rhodes, from which Wisla—thanks again to his father’s influence—was able to escape in the summer of 1941. Eventually he reached Rome where he attended the audience with Pius XII in the fall of that year.

Moreover, Doino has discovered a full-length memoir by Wisla, originally published in German (and also Hebrew) in Palestine in 1945. It was translated into English in 1966, after Wisla emigrated to America, under the title, Long Journey Home. Both the original German and English versions of the memoir contain a full chapter by Wisla in which he recounts, almost verbatim, his audience with the pope, just as he had in his 1944 Palestine Post testimony. Wisla’s memoir again describes Pius XII’s affirmation of the Jewish faith and heritage as well as the pope’s promise to assist the Jewish refugees on Rhodes. Long Journey Home expands upon his initial Palestine Post piece revealing how, a short time after his papal audience, “owing to the personal intervention of Pope Pius XII,” a ship with Red Cross workers transported the refugees at Rhodes to a much safer and humane camp on the Italian mainland where they survived the War—before the murderous Nazis took over Rhodes in 1944, seizing and deporting the island’s remaining indigenous Jews. All of this has been recounted and heavily documented by Doino from multiple sources. (For a summation of those sources, see, “Pope Pius XII: Friend and Rescuer of Jews,” Inside the Vatican, January, 2012; this is also available at: http://moynihanreport.itvworking.com/contributor/545.)
As noted above, despite the fact that Doino is the central figure in the discovery and publication of the Audience narrative, nowhere in his HTR piece does Ventresca cite that name. Given Ventresca’s flamboyant pedantry, not to mention passion for elaborate citations, this is remarkable. But abstracting from his own self-contradictory motivation, there is the larger distortion that readers are left with the impression that the only evidence for the entire “Be Proud to be a Jew!” narrative is from that single Palestine Post article examined above. It is not, as anyone who reads Doino’s findings and WPAJ can see.

In any case, Ventresca soldiers on. He next proffers the following gloss which may remind the reader that in the title of his HTR “review essay” these terms were prominent: “Between Polemic and History.” What is provided below is the first element of that hermeneutical duo, where the hyperbolic distortions are so out of control that it becomes obvious that this polemicist wouldn’t know a metaphor from a semaphore.

What is at issue is not the story itself but the manner in which Lawler exploits it for his apologetic-polemical end. It strains the limits of logic to claim, as Lawler does, that this purported spontaneous public statement constitutes one of the most important papal utterances of all time. Lawler would have readers believe that this single remark, made before a kneeling Jewish refugee beseeching papal assistance, automatically reversed centuries of overt anti-Judaic thought and discourse. Indeed, he describes it as a “revolutionary clarion” that prefigured by many years the “actual revolution” in Catholic-Jewish relations ushered in by the Second Vatican Council. (emphases supplied)

As usual when it comes to facts relative to Lawler, Ventresca is more than moderately askew—this time, only by roughly a thousand or so years. What Lawler actually wrote (and this is on page 10 of the first chapter of his book) says nothing about automatic reversals, much less about anything whatever being the most important “of all time.” For a posturing paragon of polemics (so to speak), what Ventresca should consider concentrating on is repeatedly reminding himself that, even for someone with his unusual gifts, probably the best place to start a book (or anything else) is at the beginning—as Lawlerian levity subsumes another Ventresca fiasco.

And so, after that bit of jeu d’esprit, we return to Chapter One, Page Ten—without succumbing to the temptation to ring the changes on Benjamin Disraeli’s relation to that francophone phrase:

The language of the statement makes it one of the most significant papal utterances, not only of the twentieth century but of the second millennium of the history of the church. I say this fully realizing that that is the kind of assertion which sounds so exaggerated it could easily deter any thoughtful reader from continuing. Instead, it is my hope that it will have the opposite effect, since it is only after such a reader has followed the argument of the next nine chapters that the import of Pius XII’s affirmation of Jews as such can be appreciated. “As such” is signifi-
cant, since it will become evident in the body of this book that Jews, when they weren’t being viciously persecuted, were tolerated only because they were the “witness people” to the triumph of Christianity, or because they were the protected wards of the papacy, or because of a common scripture—in short, because of some reason extraneous to their sheer reality as human beings. To that long tradition of humiliation the statement of Pius XII says: “Not so!” For the first time in over a thousand years (and probably much longer), a pope spoke publicly of and to Jews as fellow children of God—and this occurred well before the revolutionary reforms of Vatican II.

Ventresca then continues his exercise in creative deformation. Again, the emphasized passages indicate either a falsehood or an intentional doctoring of the original text—both of which are presumably essential elements in what he has lauded as his “critical-historical approach.” (The latter is confirmed by using “critical-historical modes,” in order to achieve a comprehensive “critical-historical analysis.”) Other than a couple of instances yet to come, this is as good an example of Ventresca playing “doctor, doctor,” as I am willing to take the time to assess. But the passages emphasized in the above excerpt are not so much instances of doctoring—which suggests to the common reader “modifying” or “modulating”—as they are instances of deliberate lying. So, too, with the following exercise in hyperbolic defamation.

It was 1569 when Pius V decreed his version of a solution to the Jewish problem in Christian Europe. Lawler readily acknowledges that the decree exemplified a deeply entrenched adversus Iudaeos strain in papal thought that was bequeathed to the mentalities, norms, and even the civil-legal parameters of manifold communities, small and large, across the centuries. All that changed decisively, Lawler maintains, with Pius XII’s remarks. “It took nearly five hundred years,” Lawler declares euphorically,” for Pius XII’s blessing to obliterate Pius V’s curse.” Obliterate is a very strong word indeed. The contrast between the two papal utterances, Lawler contends reasonably enough, is “stark.” Stark, too, is the astonishing claim that Pius XII’s purported wartime blessing to a Jewish refugee amounts to obliterating a deep-seated anti-Jewish tradition. It simply is implausible to argue that one random, unsubstantiated comment attributed to Pius XII in the course of a personal audience rises to the level of magisterial teaching, to a repudiation of centuries of anti-Judaic thinking, preaching, and teaching that had seeped into the recesses of European social life and civil society.

Very much like Kertzer analyzing Pius IX’s homily to the Roman women, Ventresca emulates his mentor by not only engaging in psychoanalysis, as Lawler “contends reasonably enough”; but also, in psychokinesis, as Ventresca actually hears Lawler making euphoric declarations. And, of course, it is necessary to add that the exegesis of “obliterate” is warped starkly—so to speak. Nor does Lawler know of anything that obliterated “a deep-seated anti-Jewish tradition” since what Lawler said was that what was obliterated was the specific curse uttered by St. Pius V. Nor, in fact, has it been cited in any approved papal document since. Thus, I repeat what I had asserted
earlier, i.e., at no time has Ventresca cited a passage from Lawler without doctoring it. Lastly, one would have to dig deep into the recesses of Ventresca’s memory to discover who, how, when, and where it was determined that the pope’s few words rose to the level of “magisterial teaching.” Presumably the author of Papae et Iudei inter litigium et historia knows that only the author of a papal statement (i.e., a pope himself) knows what is “magisterial” — or, for that matter, what is “authoritative.”

Ventresca then processes (as in “procession”) to a discussion of the “authoritative Jesuit journal, La Civiltà Cattolica,” a topic about which I have said my last word in WPAJ. Thus I can see no reason to point out the now conventional and—certainly at this juncture—more boring observations of Ventresca on that publication. In fact, I am bypassing his predictable critical-historical nullities altogether, with a view to focusing on a more serious Ventrescan outrage, the ritual murder trial in Kiev. His treatment of it follows immediately on his description of Pius IX’s homily to the women of Rome with its resultant “dogs” fracas. This ends with the customary feigned evenhanded conclusion, illustrating Ventresca’s putative non-partisanship—which is accompanied by this equally mandatory convoluted damnning-with-faint-praise brush-off for Lawler.

Where he might treat the subject with a measure of serene critical-historical evaluation, Lawler feels compelled to explain away what he acknowledges elsewhere is often patently offensive papal language about Jews and Judaism. Put simply, Lawler would have us dwell only fleetingly, if at all, on Pius IX’s troubling analogies since, as he maintains, Pius did not mean to say what it sounds as if he said, which is another way of saying that the pope did not mean to say simply that Jews were like dogs. (italics supplied)

After that circumlocutory saying of sayings, needless to say, it is unnecessary to say that Ventresca says nothing related to not only what Lawler wanted to say but to what Lawler actually did say—and, in fact, said very serenely rather than compulsively. Moreover, it dawned on Lawler, if he may say so, that it is almost impossible to gainsay what he did say, even by Ventresca’s revolting lie that the pope actually said “that Jews were like dogs.” To do justice to Ventresca’s lie, not to mention to do justice to Justus, we should really have in the background some singing chantoosie (“sorry Groucho!”) lip-synching, “Oh say can you say by the dawn’s early light….”

The parallel that the pontiff was drawing—though expressive of Jesus’ “hard saying” to the Canaanite woman—is based on the rudimentary Christian teaching that the gospel fulfills the message of the Hebrew prophets. Once the Jews were the children in the house of God—so the gospel and Jesus Christ say—and the gentiles were the dogs. Now the gentiles are the children in the house of God—so St. Paul and the Vicar of Christ say—and the Jews are the dogs. But just as the gospel verses are read as a sign of Jesus’ message ultimately being preached to the gentiles, so Pius’s statement, “We hope that they will return to being children,” is a sign of his desire that Jews will accept the gospel message. This is not to be deemed supersessionist acquisitiveness—vulgar notions both—but simply the fulfillment of the foundational
Christian (and human) principle, *bonum est diffusivum sui*: by its very nature the good is self-sharing. That is an axiom that explains everything from “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” to “Go preach the Gospel to every creature”—including, of course, to the Jews; but not particularly with a view to conversion; but rather with a view to sharing something that is eminently sharable.

Nor, in fact, can Ventresca contradict the above. After the mandatory condescending approbation, now growing fainter, he notes, “Yet Lawler gets bogged down in an evasive explanation of the place of animal imagery in Scripture and in Western art more generally as a devotional motif.” Although most people would find it rather difficult to get bogged down in a footnote, however evasive, it’s possible that somebody as clumsy in word and deed—as Ventresca has proved himself to be—might well trip on his own tale. Moreover, it is euphemistic, if not plain false, to describe these slanders as merely clumsy. Like much of Ventresca’s previous commentary, they are simply more lies about what Pius IX actually said and meant—as they are also regarding what the excerpt below says and means.

Rather than excoriating the Jews or resurrecting hoary medieval notions of the perfidious Jews, Lawler reasons, Pius IX’s allusion to the Jews as dogs was a scripturally-based revolutionary moment in *Jewish-Catholic relations*, marking “the approach of the end to the theological hatred for Jews instituted by the church fathers who engendered the adversus Iudaeos tradition.” So we should not take Pius IX to be the patron of an incipient Catholic anti-Semitism, as the injudicious critics suggest. Instead, Pius IX stands, in Lawler’s vision, as a great prophet and pioneer of papal reconciliation with the people of the covenant. (italics added)

Although Ventresca still can’t control his instinctive slide into the snide, the reality remains that Lawler said nothing about revolutionary moments (or, for that matter, revolutionary hours, days, weeks, months, etc.); nor did Lawler have any visions of any kind, much less of this pope as a great pioneer and prophet. However, concerning the latter, Lawler would point out that less than a century after Pius IX’s statement, the people of the Covenant were in fact the subject of papal reconciliation—at what the world now knows as the Second Vatican Council.

As for the pope’s pioneering and prophetic aspiration in general, there is strong evidence that he was certainly prescient about his longing for the independence of the Vatican from the Italian rulers of Rome. Talking with the French Ambassador in 1871, a year after the occupation of his city, the pope declared: “All that I want is a small corner of the earth where I am master…. So long as I do not have this little corner of earth, I shall not be able to exercise in their fullness my spiritual functions.” The historian citing this statement then noted: “Pius IX’s dream was not realized until 1929, with the establishment of Vatican City.” Thus it is not unreasonable to believe that possibly there was something of the pioneer and the prophet about Pius IX after all: something that certainly eclipsed his patronage of Catholic anti-Semitism, something that certainly indicated his concerns were indeed with fulfilling his “spiritual func-
tions.” Maybe, too, the pope responsible for realizing that “dream” (the much malign
ed by Ventresca and his mentor, Kertzer), Pius XI, also shared a preoccupation with
filling his “spiritual functions.”

As to the unnamed “historian” mentioned above who provided us with this informa-
ton, it is Robert A. Ventresca, writing in a work that in many ways seeks to refute
his own obsessive hysteria, Soldier of Christ: The Life of Pope Pius XII—a book that
I have already commended, if only for its evasion of the exorbitant errors in his HTR
“review essay.” And so it is hardly surprising that the Ventresca of “The Popes and
the Jews between Polemic and History” doggedly pursues those errors, now via the
following declaration.

The cycle of parsing, wishful inference, and forced argument reaches its high
point when Lawler critiques Kertzer’s claims of papal “duplicity” in the resurrec-
tion of old blood libel myths in prominent legal proceedings around the turn of the
century. Emblematic in this regard is the discussion of a notorious case of the
ritual murder trial of a Russian Jew, Mendel Beilis, in Kiev (Ukraine) in 1913.

Whatever this “is emblematic” of, it is certainly not of Lawler’s imagined three-fold
cycle of linguistic and logical violations italicized above, since precisely his empha-
thesis has been throughout this discussion on the irrefutable documentation of Kertzer’s
duplicity regarding this particular ritual murder trial. And thus I say very thoughtfully
and very explicitly: any statement that asserts otherwise—whether by a citizen of the
USA or Canada—is provably libelous. The treatment of the trial is the key point in
Were the Popes Against the Jews? just as it is the low point of Kertzer’s The Popes
Against the Jews. That is why the complete treatment of the trial in WP AJ can be pub-
licly accessed only at the aforementioned website of Justus George Lawler.

I continue with Ventresca’s excerpt above:

The long and the short of the matter is that then Cardinal Secretary of State, Merry
del Val, did offer written confirmation of the validity of these repudiations. Yet,
largely due to the obstructionist role of the Russian ambassador in Rome, the car-
dinal’s note arrived too late to influence deliberations and the eventual verdict—
a hung jury—which set Beilis free.

This characteristically confident, condescending, and contemptible observation is
indeed the short of it; since the entire purpose of Kertzer’s doctored treatment of this
trial is that readers will learn nothing about the Russian ambassador’s “obstruction”
from his book. And the reason is because he intentionally deleted the pertinent refer-
ences. Nor, of course, did our Canadian authority know anything whatever about this
trial until he read Lawler’s book—where the following statement appears.

Kertzer has followed his only source step by step, as the cardinal’s letter goes
from London to Kiev to its rejection by the Russians. The two statements are run-
ning on parallel tracks, until an unexpected—and for Kertzer an intolerable—new
player enters the scene. Immediately following Szajkowski’s excerpt about “Officially it was stated” is the following sentence—which I here underline and which Kertzer omits entirely: “But the Russian Ambassador in Rome did everything possible that the document should arrive in Kiev too late to be submitted as evidence in favor of Beilis.” The obvious conclusion from Kertzer’s deliberate deletion is that the Russian ambassador has been omitted in order to make room for someone else—who ends up being the villain pre-designated by Kertzer, both in the preceding chapter and in this one, the Cardinal secretary of state, Merry del Val. (original emphasis)

But what I find continuingly amazing is the brazenness of Kertzer and now of Ventresca, in imagining that this hard fact could simply be wished away, and the entire hoax would go unexposed. Kertzer’s own deception is a little less incomprehensible, since it entailed reams of research, including the Vatican Library, to discover it. On the other hand, his protégé merely had to read a book—which he did—and then tweak the evidence, as he does in the highlighted passage above: “Yet, largely due to the obstructionist role of the Russian ambassador in Rome….” I repeat, no Russian ambassador appears in The Popes Against the Jews, and thus that scandalously “face-saving” adverb is another illustration of the sham ethic underlying that doctored assertion.

This provides an opportune juncture to illustrate the extremes of Kertzer’s effort to feign ignorance of Alexander Ivanovitch de Nelidoff, the said Russian ambassador. The following is an excerpt from the pertinent pages of WPAJ:

The intentional deletion of the reference to the Russian ambassador in Kertzer’s account raises several issues. The first and most obvious is that if he even acknowledges the existence of the Nelidoff statement, he undermines his foundational thesis that del Val and—it now goes without saying—his co-conspirator, the pope, motivated by their ingrained anti-Semitism, failed to exonerate an unjustly accused Jew. Apart from the fact that Kertzer saw the reference to “the Russian ambassador” and to Tager’s book in Szajkowski’s article, further proof that Nelidoff was known to Kertzer is the passage he excised from Rothschild’s telegram to del Val about the Roman banking agent meeting with the cardinal, instructing him in procedures, etc. All of the latter followed very closely Nelidoff’s own description, so its omission is also prima facie evidence that vindicates del Val and the pope—a notion quite unbearable to the author of a book titled, The Popes Against the Jews.

What then tends to evoke Joseph Welch on Joseph McCarthy, “have you no sense of decency,” is that the original sentence in Szajkowski about “the Russian Ambassador in Rome” doing everything possible to have Beilis found guilty is replaced by the reference to “Merry del Val himself” working toward that end. There is no issue here regarding dubious testimony; the issue has to do with manufactured testimony by Kertzer. In addition to Maurice Samuel’s book, there is The Beilis Transcripts: The Anti-Semitic Trial that Shook the World, by Ezekiel Leikin (1993); here one may read: “To bolster the prosecution’s case at the trial, and to please his superiors, ambassador Nelidoff purposely delayed authenticating
the cardinal’s signature until the Beilis case was over. In a letter to his superior...

Nelidoff bragged about his clever ruse....” This book is one of the titles that buttresses Kertzer’s quite impressive bibliography, and which he refers to in an endnote, guiding his readers to more supporting information: “for details on the Beilis case, see … Leiken 1993.” The presumption of even a lay person when reading this would be that Leiken’s book had been consulted by Kertzer, although at this point it is certainly not inconceivable that he may merely have mentioned it to inflate his list of sources, and thus inflate his credentials.

Lastly—and by way of making clear that we are not talking about some obscure items like those “dug up” by Miccoli in various Vatican archives—Léon Poliakov in Suicidal Europe 1870-1933 also discusses the Beilis trial but concentrates, as a literary historian, on the tricked up testimony of the Catholic priest, Pranaitis. Nevertheless, Poliakov notes that, “The Russian ambassador in Rome distinguished himself by sabotaging the dispatch of copies of pertinent bulls in which past popes condemned the legend of ritual murder.” This book is also cited in Kertzer’s aforementioned impressive bibliography: “Storia dell’antisemitismo, L’Europa suicida, 1870-1933.”

Of course Ventresca’s role here is to defend Kertzer against the presumed wiles of Lawler, and thus prove the former to be the ideal scholar, commemorated by his followers, honored by his international peers, and, in his own words, “America’s foremost expert on the modern history of the Vatican’s relations with the Jews.” But, unfortunately for that line of defense, Lawler’s entire treatment of this ritual murder trial stresses the fact that Kertzer never mentioned the Russian ambassador anywhere or at any time because his real target was the Cardinal Secretary of State to whom Kertzer wanted all the blame to accrue. Thus we first read about the long and the short of the matter, and then about “the obstructionist role of the Russian ambassador in Rome, and finally about the cardinal’s note arriving too late to influence the verdict. Even though Kertzer nowhere mentions the role of the Russian ambassador, Ventresca has the audacity to assert the following—with some distracting new data, here italicized.

Kertzer acknowledges all of this, but guardedly and skeptically, reasoning that neither Merry del Val nor the pope, by this time Pius X, moved decisively or quickly enough to seize on a golden opportunity to repudiate publicly all charges of ritual murder being leveled against Jews.

In fact, the lies are continuing. Kertzer acknowledges none of this, whether “guardedly” or “skeptically.” Furthermore, the insertion of the term “reasoning,” allows Ventresca—as he has done throughout his article—to divert attention from what the reader has, in fact, just read, and onto Ventresca’s own skill in reading the mind of Kertzer. In other similar instances this “skill” was exercised on various third parties or entities. Usually these have entailed reading the mind of some pope or ecclesiastic who is related to some alleged moral or political aberration or—what amounts to the same thing—some defender of such aberrations like Lawler. But more
often it is a flood of verbal distractions intended to illustrate Ventresca’s evenhanded viewpoint, accompanied by an occasional mild slap on the wrist for Kertzer.

Hence the reader is subjected immediately to Ventresca’s next non-incriminating but certainly trivial and intentionally distracting comments.

Moreover, Kertzer complains that there was nothing like an official rebuke of the campaign conducted in various Catholic newspapers around Europe that spoke assuredly of Beilis’s guilt and expressed righteous indignation at the very thought of Jews asking the Holy See to authenticate papal statements on the public record. To that end, Kertzer points out that there was never any public repudiation of articles in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, for instance, which in the spring of 1914, were suggesting that Beilis was guilty of ritual murder.

Then come these gems from a seemingly critical assessment of Kertzer’s position, but which are also made up of bits of trivia—here underlined. Again, the goal is to show that Ventresca is entirely committed to criticizing Kertzer, even if what he cites to do this is so incidental as to be vacuous.

An attentive reading of the relevant sources suggests that Kertzer’s account of the Beilis trial and his criticisms of the role of the Vatican leave something to be desired. Kertzer fails to acknowledge fully, for instance, that the exchanges between Lord Rothschild and Cardinal Merry del Val were widely publicized in the major newspapers of the day, leaving an embarrassed anti-Semitic Catholic press to dismiss the cardinal’s conclusions as a matter of what Zosa Szajkowski described as “personal opinion” rather than papal policy. So, too, does Kertzer fail to appreciate fully that Beilis’s defenders generally favored a “discreet diplomacy” over brash public statements, for fear of provoking any strong public reaction at the prospect of such high-level intervention on behalf of a lone Jew on trial for murder.”

After parsing Ventresca’s exercise in the “balanced” criticism of his mentor, David Kertzer, what reader of the *Harvard Theological Review* wouldn’t applaud this agreeably acquiescent pupil? This Kertzerian offspring has managed to rig texts so that the real villain, the Russian ambassador, disappears from the narrative altogether, and we can focus on something as trivial and, in fact, as inconceivable as “an embarrassed anti-Semitic Catholic press.” To quote John Connelly (soon to appear on the scene): “What in the world did that mean?” All the while, a totally innocent man is put on historic display as the guilty party. The reader is presumably expected to agree at this denouement of the entire lengthy drama.

“Of course he’s guilty! For God’s sake, he’s a cardinal! Even more incriminating, he’s the Papal Secretary of State! CASE CLOSED.”

In any event, one cannot help but think to oneself, “Thank God, that’s over.” But, alas, there are three plus pages Ventresca has to fill up with more divertimenti. Thus the very next paragraph (no extra space between its predecessor) takes up one of the most inconsequential incidents in this entire narrative—an incident that was so tri-
fling I was almost too embarrassed to treat in WP AJ. Nor, in fact, would I treat of it now, except that it gets an entire page in Ventresca—which certainly gives one a final (at least one can hope) insight into his scale of paltry values.

This comment follows immediately on Ventresca’s treatment of the Beilis trial. “The charges continue apace as Lawler suggests that Kertzer purposefully mistranslated a handwritten note found in the Archives of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith…” How apace these charges are is evident from the fact that they related to an entirely other issue regarding ritual murder in the reign of the preceding pope, and discussed in WP AJ in the preceding chapter. Other than that, Ventresca is crawling at the proper speed. But since I am drawing to the end of this tedious miscellany of Ventrescanisms, I will merely quote from WP AJ, and leave the decision concerning significance up to whoever wants to make it.

As also noted, the outlandish phrase, “a few dupes in England,” is Kertzer’s wording—and as we shall also see, particularly in the treatment of the Kiev trial, Kertzer is not above drastically mistranslating or doctoring crucial texts. As suggested above in the “thought experiment,” “illuso” when translated into English as “dupe” has a crude tone which even bigoted churchmen would be unlikely to employ, whether in a never published note or elsewhere. “Illuso” as cognate of illusory is better conveyed by “dreamer,” “fantasizer,” or “wishful thinker,” although it should come as no surprise that the most damaging translation will be chosen by Kertzer, and relished by his reviewers. Still, the fact that the two terms most basked in by critics of the papacy, “dogs” and “dupes,” are in the real world trivial epithets—that fact may be an indicator of the sensibilities informing such relish.

After that exercise in trivia translation, there are still several pages left for a homily on personal morality; although in fact it’s not a homily, but a lecture; and in fact, it’s really on good manners—which, as we have seen earlier—for Ventresca comes to the same thing as morality. The homily-lecture also provides space for a dose of whitewash intended to erase from everybody’s memories all of Kertzer’s explorations into the chicane—an arena that Ventresca’s professional patois is attempting to transform into the chic.

But, it never works, as the initial stalwart affirmation confronts reality (i.e., historic facts), and Ventresca is compelled to hastily wipe the egg from his face. There are so many of these ipse dixits rebinding on him, it’s almost as though he reveled in self-destruction, in cutting off his nose to spite his face. That reveling, along with the lengthy quotation below, led me out of sheer linguistic despair to coin what should go down in philological history as the first Ventrescanism: “auto-rhinodectomy”—a term in all its heptametric splendiferousness that I collegially proffer to its source and inspiration, Batsman Bob.

… Lawler goes well beyond the normal scholarly critique of a respected colleague’s work by accusing Kertzer of outright “fabrication” in addition to “drastically mistranslating or doctoring crucial texts.” These are most serious charges. Doubtless, Lawler’s sharp tone will give readers pause, but they must not dwell
on these charges too long or too seriously. The charges are unfounded and strain the standards of collegial scholarly confrontation and disagreement. One might take issue with Kertzer’s selective presentation of certain historical evidence—an occasional quote here and there that is taken out of context or parsed selectively to buttress an argument. Yet this hardly constitutes “fabrication” or “doctoring” of texts no matter how caustically and emphatically one insists. (emphases added)

Kertzer certainly goes well beyond normal scholarly definitions of “selective presentation of evidence,” or of “quotes taken out of context,” or of “selective parsing of texts.” If these pollyannish replications are not called doctoring or fabricating, our dictionaries will have to be rewritten so we can know what those acts are called. Whatever that may be, it is certainly not “historiography.” Nevertheless, Ventresca’s whitewashing flows on. The last statement in his HTR “review essay” (though there will be a one page annex) is the following: “At any rate, it bears repeating that whatever doubts one [sic] might have about the cogency and persuasiveness of Kertzer’s argument, it simply will not do to suggest that he has fabricated or doctored evidence in order to prove his point.” (emphases added)

This hectoring tone reduces matters of sheer factuality to matters of social protocol at best; or, at worst, to those hackneyed gestures of politesse that initiated our introduction to Ventresca. There are several pages (179-187) devoted to a specific passage which was undeniably fabricated by Kertzer, and then replicated by his emulators.

The Pope thought that the Jews in Italy—a few of whom he had met—were basically good. But the mass of the Continent’s Jews, the hordes of Jews who lived in central and eastern Europe, were something quite different, a threat to healthy Christian society, a lesson he learned in Poland.

This was my comment in the book:

This assertion is raw, undiluted Kertzer. Like the earlier Satanic synagogues or Jewish dogs, these threatening hordes are non-existent save in the author’s imagination. But there is a significant difference in that previously when assaying the mentality of any figure in the Vatican, from pope or secretary of state to the most incidental underling, there was at least some basis in an official document: a letter, a report, a book. Similarly, when Kertzer misinterpreted statements by popes, cardinals, bishops, etc., or completely dismissed their statements in favor of their “real meaning” to be found in various Catholic newspapers, there was at least a semblance of a foundation in something that had actually at one time or another been said by those personages or published in those venues. Now, in order to round out his entire discussion of the overwhelming importance of those “three years in Poland,” and to make them the foundation of Ratti’s oncoming anti-Semitic pontificate, words are simply invented by the author to be put in this pope’s mouth….

But wait there’s more! That final statement has a footnote which is not only the last one in the entire review-essay, it spills over onto the last page of this whole dense
[all ambiguities intended] undertaking [all ambiguities again intended], and it introduces a whole new theme—but a theme that in Lawler’s WPAJ was introduced at the very beginning and amplified mainly in the middle pages, as any reader can determine by checking the index for “Connelly, John.”

This is Ventresca’s final, definitive, terminal, ultimate, when-all-is-said-and-done, twelve-line footnote, numbered: 73. It also allows this entire discussion to close on the same note of concern with “doctored scholarship” that terminated the discussion of these matters in an earlier issue of U.S. Catholic Historian (30, no. 2, Spring 2012, pp. 77-103).

“In Were the Popes Against the Jews? Lawler levels similar charges against historian John Connelly from the University of California, Berkeley, in a sharp disagreement over how to interpret the Vatican’s response to the 1938 Italian Fascist racial law regulating marriage. Lawler crosses the line, and not for the first time, when he questions Connelly’s ‘state of mind’ and suggests that his interlocutor is suffering from ‘some kind of synaptic disconnect,’ hence what Lawler calls the ‘schizoid character’ of Connelly’s ‘ploy.’”

The text at issue is the following from Pius XII’s first encyclical, Summi Pontificatus:

The Church hails with joy and follows with her maternal blessing every method of guidance and care which aims at a wise and orderly evolution of particular forces and tendencies having their origin in the individual character of each race, provided that they are not opposed to the duties incumbent on men from their unity of origin and common destiny.” (italics supplied)

Unfortunately, Connelly had deliberately deleted that last italicized clause, and when I called him on his doctoring of the text, he expanded the excision to an indictment of pope and church for their openness to racism in general, a theme he further expatiated on in his otherwise generally estimable, From Enemy to Brother.

The words on “race” I attribute to Pius XII were spoken by him and are not doctored, as anyone who consults the text of Summi pontificatus can discern. The sentence’s second part does nothing to weaken the surprising call for the church to concern itself with the “orderly evolution of particular forces and tendencies having their origin in the individual character of each race.” What in the world did that mean? Unfortunately, to some East European Catholics it meant boycotting Jewish business, an activity that seemed to promote the forces of race while not endangering the unity of mankind—something understood to be spiritual. (italics supplied)

At that juncture I made the remark that so affronted Ventresca’s sensibilities:

There is no need to elaborate on the plain falsehood that deleting “the sentence’s second part” isn’t doctoring “the words . . . that were spoken by him” [Pius XII]
in the first part. “Deleting” is “doctoring.” But then to assert that the deleted part “does nothing to weaken” the overall assertion raises serious questions about Connelly’s state of mind—which can’t even be described as a “state,” since it is obviously afflicted with some kind of synaptic disconnect. The schizoid character of the ploy is beyond question: why would anyone go to the trouble of deleting from a text the very passage which one then claims doesn’t affect the text’s meaning?

This bears on matters of truth and falsehood, of good and evil. In sum, it bears on whether one is entitled to embrace the latter in order to prove one’s concern with what is perceived as the overwhelmingly more important expression of the former, i.e., Christian-Catholic guilt for the Holocaust. It was in *Commonweal* (“Reformer and Racialist,” January 18, 2008) that Connelly launched a similar verbal charade, whereby he took an optimistic opinion regarding the future of the church that Benedict XVI voiced in Rome to the College of Cardinals and, in a casually deliberate lie, asserted that the Pope had made the statement to Polish bishops in Czestochowa. Then to drive home papal perversity, Connelly asked his Catholic readers, “Are these not strange words to be spoken by a German to Poles?” “Yes, they certainly are,” would be the reply of one of those Poles named John Pawlikowski, even though it was obvious to everybody in the real world that (as I say in *WP AJ*) “what the pope did talk about at Mary’s shrine—was Mary.” Nor were those “strange words” uttered two days later when the pope visited Auschwitz. There he spoke at length and with visible emotion about how his presence at “that place” was “particularly difficult and troubling for a Christian, for a Pope from Germany.”

Those are the words of an intentionally disdained pope, as described in the words of Justus George Lawler. They are quite different from the words of John Pawlikowski, referring to the words of John Connelly, which are described as, “the words of a somewhat gentle and very serious, competent scholar who would have welcomed a constructive exchange”—presumably with Lawler. In fact, these words, like those of Connelly, Ventresca, and Kertzer himself, are the words of the “ideologues” mentioned in the title of *WP AJ*. They are the words of those who sacrifice truth to personal beliefs and personal commitments, whether the latter are political, religious, economic, or social.

Yes, “schizoid” and “synaptic disconnect” are the precise terms I used, and I would use them again, since it still astonishes me that a respected historian writing in a venue known for its commitment to serious journalism would deliberately tell an outrageous lie simply to get the attention of editors and readers. How does anyone even go about planning something like that? There is, moreover, the phenomenon that it did work. And, as most thoughtful people have surmised, it worked because all good liberal Catholics share the conviction that the now retiring Papa Ratzinger, former Inquisitor General, was quite capable of precisely this kind of outrageous conduct.

But the real crux of that quotation is twofold: first, it relies on the same imputation of guilt that impelled Connelly’s own abuses. Lawler must be wrong about his accusations of doctored texts and fabricated evidence because *le tout monde*, includ-
ing David Kertzer and Robert Ventresca, knows that loyal papists will do or say any-
thing to vindicate their leaders. The second oddity about that footnote is its place-
ment; as noted above, it is at what can only be described as the very, very end of a
very lengthy “review essay.” The only optimistic explanation that comes to mind is
that perhaps what has been repeated over and over in the body of Ventresca’s piece,
now has the status of an arrière pensée that is suddenly gnawing at his conscience
and crying out for the rejection of his absurdly warped apologetic. In the words of
David Kertzer, the fons et origo of so much of that apologetic, “I’m not holding my
breath.” Would that he were so doing, and perhaps doing so with the same ardor that
has gained for the team of Kertzer and Ventresca blessings on their work from the
good fathers of the Society of Jesus in their estimable publication, America.
And thus we return to where we began, with a judgment that illustrates the fact that
all history, all theology, like all politics, is local. It’s the little foxes that spoil the vine.

*********

STOP THE PRESSES! THIS NEWS HOT OFF THE WEB!

The Civility and Decorum Society of North America has just announced that
Professor Robert A. Ventresca of King’s University College at the University of
Western Ontario is the first Canadian to be named an Honorary Fellow of the
Society, affectionately known as CADS.
Appendix

Jacob Neusner on
*Popes and Politics: Reform, Resentment, and the Holocaust,*
a book described by Robert A. Ventresca as a “Roving Polemic”

To understand the focus of this profound and original meditation on the interplay of theological conviction and political reality we have to ignore the allusion to the Holocaust in the title. That is not because Justus George Lawler, an experienced voice in Catholic theology and philosophy of religion for a generation, does not deal with the intense debate on Pius XII and on what the Roman Catholic Church did, should have done, failed to do, or should never have done, in that catastrophe of European civilization.

Nor is it to suggest that Lawler intends either an indictment or an apologia for the institution that calls itself “the body of Christ.” It is because Lawler has sought successfully, in my view to place the acutely contemporary debate into the more profound context of the ongoing struggle for reformation and renewal in Roman Catholic Christianity. What makes Lawler’s book intensely interesting is his framing of contemporary issues in their historical and cultural context. Few parties to the immediate controversy frame a position that proves commensurate, from the Catholic perspective, with what is at stake: the standing of the institution that carries forward the event of God’s taking human form and walking this earth.

Roman Catholics understand the frailty and imperfection of their church in this world, and they, far more than Protestants, grasp what is at stake in that imperfection.

Lawler starts his book with a quotation from John Henry Newman: “In her very vastness, her manifold constituents, her complicated structure she advances, retires, goes to and fro, passes to the right or left, bides her time…. It is the divinely appointed method of her coping with the world’s power,” and that is what Lawler explains in this deeply engaging, well crafted argument.

In the context of the world’s expectations of an institutional church claiming to carry forward in this world, in political terms, the presence of God on earth, perspective on the debate over Pius XII and the Catholic response to National Socialism shifts. That debate must find its proportion in 200 years of Catholic upheaval, beginning with the French Revolution and the traumas of the 19th century reordering of European political structures, including the once free standing and then subordinated Vatican.

That is not to suggest that Lawler dismisses the indictment of the papacy that has just now been drawn up. He argues with some of the most one sided statements. He reads them carefully and attempts to respond to articles of the indictment. But that is only to open the way for the process of reform and renewal to take hold.

My reading of the book as an effort to place the immediate issues in a broader framework derives from the last three chapters. I know of no other systematic engagement with those issues—as explicit as Lawler’s neologism, “Papaphobia”—that understands the indictment to form a tribute to the high expectations the world pres-
ents to “the mystical body of Christ.” If any one of the this-worldly constructions in response to transcendent aspirations—in simple language religious institutions—has ever fully met the challenge of “coping with the world’s power,” I do not know its name. Lawler embodies the reformation of the Catholic Church, which perpetually renews and reminds the church of its vocation.

Jews will never understand the Catholic response to the debate on Pius XII if they ignore the context in which Catholics frame their position. It is not a single event, even though it is a singular one, but only another chapter in a long, long history of struggle between theological ideal and political reality. Lawler does not for one minute concede the articles of indictment of Pius XII or enter a plea of guilty; he insists on probity and justice and a thorough examination of the record in the context of the historical events themselves. But he shows how Catholics are able to hold together the conflicting narratives of this world and (from their viewpoint) the perspective of God—the perspective upon Peter’s Church. So he embodies the Catholic claim that the Protestant Reformation missed the point, and that the reformation of the Catholic Church realized the ancient, enduring promise of Peter’s commission.

Since we Jews deal with institutionalizations of religion—synagogues, rabbis, chief rabbis not to mention the entire state-empowered Chief Rabbinate in the state of Israel—we do well to see how theologians in Catholic Christianity reflect upon the Catholic counterpart to those media of this-worldly realization of other-worldly aspiration.