"Artisans ... for Antichrist": Jews, Radical Catholic Traditionalists, and the Extreme Right

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The Israeli historian, Israel J. Yuval, recently wrote:

The Christian-Jewish debate that started nineteen hundred years ago, in our day came to a conciliatory close. ... In one fell swoop, the anti-Jewish position of Christianity became reprehensible and illegitimate. ... Ours is thus the first generation of scholars that can and may discuss the Christian-Jewish debate from a certain remove ... a post-political age.¹

This appraisal helped spur Yuval to write his recent controversial book *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. Yuval based his optimistic assessment on the strength of the reforms in Catholicism that stemmed from the adoption by the Second Vatican Council in 1965 of the document known as *Nostra Aetate*. *Nostra Aetate* in Michael Phayer’s words, was the “revolutionary” document that signified “the Catholic church’s reversal of its 2,000 year tradition of antisemitism.”²

Yet recent events in the relationship between Catholics and Jews could well cause one to wonder about the optimism inherent in Yuval’s pronouncement. For, while the established Catholic Church is still officially committed to the teachings of *Nostra Aetate*, the opponents of that document and of “modernity” in general have continued their fight and appear to have gained, if not a foothold, at least a hearing in the Vatican today. And, since in the view of these radical Catholic traditionalists “[i]nternational Judaism wants to radically defeat Christianity and to be its substitute” using tools like the Free-

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masons, it is in their views on Jews and Judaism that we can find the most profound expression of their radical rejection of *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican II, and the modern virtues of democracy and tolerance.³

Although the firestorm of publicity aroused in recent years by the actor Mel Gibson’s film “The Passion of the Christ” and the more recent Holocaust denial remarks of Bishop Richard Williamson have died down, they serve to remind us that for some Catholics the subsequent statements and reforms by the Church in regard to the Jewish people, such as *Nostra Aetate* and its successor documents, are still unacceptable, and the earlier tradition of “the teachings of contempt”⁴ still retain their validity.

An even more basic question is, of course, that of definition. Following the sociologist Michael Cuneo, I begin with the loose definition of those who have rejected the reforms of Vatican II and “entered into schism from the institutional church.” However, I should stress that the focus of this article will be on only examining the attitudes of those extreme traditionalists toward Jews, Judaism, and the related area of religious freedom.⁵

The Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX) has become the locus of the extreme Catholic traditionalist world. It was created in 1970 by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who first came to attention when he refused to sign the Vatican II statement on Religious Liberty and the Church in the Modern World.⁶ As a result, in 1970, he created a traditionalist seminary in Econe, Switzerland, and in the same year he founded the Society of Saint Pius X. In 1973 and 1974, the SSPX came to the United States, with chapels being established in California, Texas, and New York. Lefebvre continued to publicly criticize the reforms of Vatican II, including the liturgical changes, and came into more and more overt conflict with Rome. He was ordered to close down his Swiss seminary in 1974 by Pope Paul VI but refused, and as a result his priestly functions were suspended in 1976. This did not stop Lefebvre, who upped the ante in 1983 by threatening to consecrate a successor.

Trying a different response, a year later Pope John Paul II reintroduced, under some conditions, the Tridentine (Latin) Mass, which was a gesture of conciliation to the traditionalists. Lefebvre and the traditionalists were not reconciled however, and three years later Lefebvre again threatened to consecrate a successor. This time the Vatican responded by entering into negotiations with the group, and indeed, on May 5, 1988, Lefebvre signed an agreement that required him to acknowledge his loyalty to the Vatican and to accept the new Mass as legitimate. In return, the SSPX was to be recognized and allowed to continue to use the Tridentine Mass in its services. The very next day, Lefebvre repudiated the agreement, and on June 30, 1988 he consecrated four bishops, in defiance of Rome’s authority. This time, the Vatican responded forcefully, excommunicating Lefebvre and his priests and putting the SSPX into a state of schism.⁷ Lefebvre died in 1991, but by then the SSPX had become established and was able to withstand the loss of its founder. Bishop Bernard Fellay (Swiss) was elected as Superior General in 1994 and was re-elected in 2006.

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6 Ibid., p. 91.

7 Ibid., pp. 91-92.